

Beginning and End

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Category:

[F/M](#)

Fandom:

[Harry Potter - J. K. Rowling](#)

Relationships:

[Hermione Granger/Draco Malfoy](#), [background Harry Potter/Ginny Weasley](#)

Characters:

[Hermione Granger](#), [Draco Malfoy](#), [Theodore Nott](#), [Blaise Zabini](#), [Pansy Parkinson](#), [Astoria Greengrass](#), [Lucius Malfoy](#), [Narcissa Black Malfoy](#), [Harry Potter](#), [Ginny Weasley](#), [Ron Weasley](#), [Lavender Brown](#)

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Language:

[English](#)

Series:

Part 2 of [The World of Wait and Hope](#)

Collections:

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Beginning and End

by [mightbewriting](#)

Summary

Years. Broken into months into weeks into days—into hours, minutes, seconds—into moments. Simple at one end, complex at the other. In Draco's experience, moments, even when simple, had a habit of becoming irretrievable. Moments grew, stretched, multiplied into ages and eras that defined whole stretches of measurable time. Draco regretted several moments in his life, some within his control, some without: all of them irretrievable in nature. At a certain point, wedged between 'what-ifs' of his own devising, he'd stopped trying to keep track of those regrettable moments: now and then, pushing and pulling, coming and going, beginning and end. Moments were only moments for just as long. After that, he had no control.

[In which Draco is forced to work with Hermione, falls in love, makes many mistakes, and eventually becomes his own man. A Draco POV prequel to Wait and Hope.]

Notes

Part TWO of FIVE in the World of Wait and Hope series.

This fic is intended to be read *after* Wait and Hope.

See the end of the work for [more notes](#)

- Translation into Italiano available: [Beginning and end-Traduzione italiana](#) by [Emune](#)
- Translation into Español available: [Beginning and End Traducción](#) by [Sharlee](#)
- Translation into Español available: [Beginning and End - Dramione \(Traducción\)](#) by [Naikiara](#)

Chapter 1: -3.083, -3.166, -3.250

Chapter Notes

hello! a couple notes before we begin:

this is a very long story. technically, it's four stories in one fic. you can think of each year as its own fic, compiled here in one larger story. additionally, this fic is more bildungsroman than it is romance. it heavily features romance, and the romance is, in a lot of ways, a major vehicle for draco's growth, but this is ultimately a story about a character coming into his own. he falls in love along the way, hard.

Part One: 2002

"What we call the beginning is often the end

And to make an end is to make a beginning

The end is where we start from."

— T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*, *Little Gidding*

—

January

Years. Broken into months into weeks into days—into hours, minutes, seconds—into moments. Simple at one end, complex at the other. In Draco's experience, moments, even when simple, had a habit of becoming irretrievable. Moments grew, stretched, multiplied into ages and eras that defined whole stretches of measurable time. Draco regretted several moments in his life, some within his control, some without: all of them irretrievable in nature. At a certain point, wedged between 'what-ifs' of his own devising, he'd stopped trying to keep track of those regrettable moments: now and then, pushing and pulling, coming and going, beginning and end. Moments were only moments for just as long. After that, he had no control.

He'd wanted it to happen something like this:

A confident knock on his father's study door—a pause, just for a beat—enough to acknowledge that Draco had engaged in the formality of it, before he let himself in anyway: poised, sure, a far cry from his former self so desperate for Lucius Malfoy's impossible approval.

His father would recognize the shift; Draco had been in Europe apprenticing for his potions mastery for just over a year. Time heals all wounds and other such rot. Lucius would offer him a seat, and maybe even a drink of something forbidden and expensive from his personal stores. He'd ask Draco about his mastery with reluctant pride that Draco had taken initiative to make himself employable, respectful—a potentially productive member of a society that saw the Malfoy name as something actively unproductive. And all of this despite the fact that Draco didn't *have* to work and never would: not so long as his inheritance, every last drop of his money tied up in the family name, continued to pay his way in the world.

Draco would share his thoughts with his father, more than he normally did. He'd share just how beautiful he found Sarajevo, how refreshing it had been to be nearly-anonymous on a day-to-day basis. How he'd stopped needing a Calming Draught every night before he went to bed. How he'd tried dating, women who had no idea about his money or his name or his family history. How the dating hadn't gone very well, but the shagging had been a welcome change after two years of probation chained to the manor.

And that little detail, oversharing and a touch inappropriate, well, that would make Lucius *laugh*. He'd really laugh, in a way Draco hadn't heard in years, certainly not since the war, maybe not since Draco started at Hogwarts. The sound of Lucius's laughter existed—bound by time—in Draco's memories before he'd started school, before the ominous creep of a new war had started making its presence known, rising like bile and tainting the taste of any laughter that might have come later.

Lucius would listen, be interested. He'd still be stern, stoic, stubbornly aristocratic in the way he sat with his back straight and expression schooled. But somewhere behind his gray eyes, a near mirror image of Draco's own, would be a glimpse of the father figure Draco had so desperately wished to please, to impress, to emulate with every drop of the magic in his blood and bones.

It would be a short conversation, but meaningful. It would be representative of a change in their relationship: healing after their respective time spent in Azkaban, under house arrest, and then apart

for a year. Draco would leave the study reacquainted with his father, cautiously hopeful that, man to man, they might be able to find a way to see each other again now that the fog of war had dissipated.

Instead, things went awry from the very first moment.

Draco didn't even have the chance to knock on the door, and he certainly didn't feel confident or sure of himself. He mostly felt tired, exhausted from several international Floo connections ferrying him from the Balkans and all the way back to Wiltshire.

"Enter," spoken through the heavy wooden door stopped Draco's fist in its tracks, a centimeter from contact.

Draco took a deep breath through his nose, lips pressed together. He pushed the door open.

Lucius Malfoy looked tired. Draco's thoughts stalled on that observation as he approached the desk, watching Lucius as he scanned the parchment in front of him, evidently much more important than the son he'd not seen in a year. Lucius hadn't looked much like himself since Azkaban in Draco's fifth year. He'd looked even worse after a second stint while he awaited trial after the war. He'd steadily withered, whittled away, in the years of house arrest he'd been ordered to endure without the use of his magic. A year apart had not changed any of that, only made it more apparent as Draco's eyes caught on the sunken pallor of his father's skin and the dark circles beneath his eyes.

He was out of practice, Draco realized. The muscles had atrophied: the ones required to shove aside and sort through the complicated web of emotion and attachment he felt for the partially unravelling man in front of him, a man who'd once been his idol, his entire world.

"Sit, Draco," Lucius said, still not looking up.

He'd forgotten how that felt. With a year of time and distance and very few owls between them, Draco had managed to forget how paralyzing an order from his father could be. He'd forgotten how closely it reminded him of all the other orders he'd received in his life: the ones he'd tried to follow, failed to follow, and hated to follow.

No, I'd rather not, Draco wanted to say. He'd rather his father look up from his fucking parchments and actually greet his son.

Instead of demanding any of that for himself, Draco sank into the seat,

stiff and forward, spine nowhere near making contact with the back of the chair.

Finally, Lucius looked at him. Years and circumstance might have weathered him, but that uncanny feeling of being *lesser* under his father's appraisal still remained. Draco stiffened, muscles along his back snapping his spine even straighter, determined not to recoil.

Lucius offered him the parchment.

"Your betrothal agreement."

He'd wanted this conversation to represent the potential for them to move on, to rediscover some kind of father-son relationship after they'd both had time apart.

He hadn't expected, not for a single, inconceivable moment that *this* was what his father had intended. Draco had been back in the manor, back in the country, for less than an hour and already a marriage contract was being dropped in his lap? Draco wanted to laugh, and he nearly did. He could feel the sensation bubbling at the base of his throat, latching onto sheer absurdity. It was hilarious how ridiculous it was, how insulting, how utterly indifferent to anything Draco might have possibly wanted or had planned for his own life.

No, he wanted to say, *I don't have a betrothal agreement.*

He could taste the words, knew the shape of them, could say similar things to just about anyone else in his life. But here, in front of this man, he simply reached out and took the parchment. He couldn't bring himself to read it.

He supposed he had Aunt Bella to thank for his feigned composure, for the fact that he hadn't choked on his indignation. He found the shard of shock inside his mind and flaked it away, a forceful removal from the spaces in his brain required to process complex thought, to speak. In the absence of shock, suppressed by Occlumency, Draco located his ability to engage in this conversation.

"Who?"

He hated that he asked. But his only other option was *no*, and he'd already failed to say that.

"Victor Greengrass has been exceedingly generous by even entertaining a union with our family, sullied as the name may be."

The words fell out of Lucius's mouth like ash, something foul and fetid and decidedly vile, puffing and pluming and choking the air around them with his distaste, with his disagreement.

And all Draco wanted to do was throw that rotted thing back at him, demand Lucius elaborate on exactly *how* their family name had been sullied, identify in excruciating detail every step, every decision he made that brought them all to this point.

But instead, "Of course, Father."

Another breath through the nose. Draco had his own sense of something decaying inside his throat.

"The older Greengrass girl would not agree to a union with you."

Draco's first instinct was relief. He and Daphne weren't close. She'd had a thing with Blaise for a couple of years, and she'd effectively stolen Pansy from Draco's life after the war with words like *healing* , and *space* , and *bad influences* . Which would have been a hysterical assessment of his character if not so wildly hypocritical in the face of Pansy fucking Parkinson.

Draco's second instinct was confusion. He didn't even realize Daphne had a sister. He couldn't bite his tongue this time; the question slipped out with far less decorum than Lucius Malfoy required.

"How much younger is she—the other one?"

That feeling of decay in his throat slipped lower, souring in his stomach at the idea of being betrothed to a child, of planning a wedding and a life along a timeline that required she come of age first.

"Two years your junior. Not that it matters," Lucius said.

It absolutely, positively, unequivocally mattered. As that thought careened to the first position in his queue of bewildered thoughts, Draco wondered what Lucius would say or do if he actually voiced it. But Draco could more easily be buried in a mountain of words he wished to say but didn't, than actually work up the courage to say them. Self-preservation at its finest; avoidance of the issue was the only way to survive a conversation with Lucius Malfoy.

"Her name?" he asked instead, hating himself more than a little bit for it.

“Astoria. You’re meeting her tomorrow,” Lucius said. His lip curled, then softened before he spoke again. “Your mother insists that you meet her—that you be involved in the planning process.”

Draco didn’t need him to elaborate. Lucius’s distaste for the fact that Draco might have any involvement in planning his own wedding, his whole future that had just been handed to him on a sheet of parchment, was evident in his clipped tone. Draco took a deep breath, incapable of looking at his father, of looking at the contract in his hands, of doing anything but focusing on the slice of serenity he’d made with his Occlumency. He leaned into that, feeling calm, feeling something adjacent to bravery, and asked a question for himself, avoidance be damned.

“Do I have a choice?” Draco asked, as close as he could bring himself to something that looked like defiance.

Draco clenched his jaw, muscles grinding his teeth together when his father released a short, sharp laugh, sealed with a heavy stare.

“I’m informing you as a courtesy,” he said. “This is your duty to your family, Draco. Your independence has been tolerated long enough.”

Draco tried to ignore the itching reminder of his other duty born by him for his family. The one on his left arm, seared into his skin and in his mind, echoes of scorched flesh and strangled screams. These duties, they were the price he paid in exchange for vaults full of gold, a name that—even sullied—opened doors, and the promise of a family that protected its own.

But he couldn’t say it, couldn’t voice an agreement to the enormity of a marriage dropped on him as a welcome home gift. So he nodded, a quick dip of his chin, jaw muscles barely allowing the movement. He stood, almost wincing at the liberty he took by not yet having been dismissed. But he’d already committed to this little act of defiance, this moment of disrespect.

“If that’s all,” he prompted, holding his father’s stare, wondering when it stopped feeling like looking into the future and started feeling like a window to the past, tainted and fogged with bad decisions.

He didn’t wait to be dismissed; he couldn’t escape the study fast enough. His Occlumency wavered and his chest tightened like it might crack, ribs reduced to rubble. He fought to breathe against a throat insisting that it seal itself shut.

That wasn't how he'd wanted their reunion to go. And, even if given the chance to do it again, to somehow right the series of wrongs that tumbled one after another over the course of a few stifled minutes, Draco didn't think he'd know how. There had been moments, several of them, and he'd wasted every last one.

"Care of Magical Creatures?" she asked with a hopeful, guarded tone.

Draco couldn't seem to tear his eyes away from Astoria's delicate fingers, almost surreal looking, fine bones encased in pale, flawless flesh. Everything about the movement in her hands felt purposeful and planned, executed with intent as she gripped her soup spoon, elegant but with a tiny, almost imperceptible wobble.

She was trying. He was trying. And yet, he could already feel the cloud of failure settling around them. Draco fought a grimace, forcing himself to look at something other than her spoon as she took careful sips of her soup with perfect pureblood etiquette.

"Hated it," he said. "I don't like animals much. I was, ah—" Draco couldn't remember getting to know another person ever being this painful. Every inquiry into the others' interests landed like a misaimed charm, miles from its target. "I was attacked by a Hippogriff in class once."

There. He'd shared something personal, that's how people did this, right? He felt rather like throwing himself off a bridge.

"I'd heard about that," she said. "I was a first year."

He made a noise of acknowledgment. He already knew that. They'd already suffered through stunted get-to-know-you's like age, and house, and had now ended up on favorite subjects.

He watched her wrists this time, as she lowered her soup spoon. Something about her fingers, her hands, her wrists, they seemed so fragile, so birdlike. Draco didn't know how to act around breakable things. In his experience, he had a tendency to break them.

"Are you going to eat?" she asked. It wasn't accusatory. It wasn't

unkind. It mostly sounded curious, a little timid. The muscles around her mouth had tightened, just enough that he noticed, but her eyes remained relaxed as she glanced from his soup to his face. He wondered how much social training had been poured into her to result in such grace. It was impressive. She was lovely. And he felt nothing for her.

He looked down at his bowl.

“Right, of course.” He picked up his spoon but made no move towards his bowl. “Flying?” he asked. “Fan of Quidditch?”

She wrinkled her nose and then blinked, eyes widening. They were a pretty shade of blue. She was a pretty girl. Draco had known her for all of ten minutes and he already suspected that classic beauty and fine manners wouldn’t be enough.

She was the bird, but he felt like he’d been put in a cage.

“Flying is not—my favorite,” she said with a slight hesitation, just enough that he could see her effort, still trying so hard. “Was it yours?”

He tried to smile, to give her a kindness that said he was trying, too. The muscles in his cheeks fought against him: tight, resisting the disingenuousness.

“Potions, actually. Though flying was a close second.”

Astoria set her spoon down, letting her hands rest in her lap.

“I didn’t take potions past OWLs,” she paused and he could feel her searching him. Without her tiny hands in view, Draco focused on her dark hair instead: shiny and smooth, a brunette version to Daphne’s blonde. “Astronomy? I would imagine you were well versed before school with your Black lineage.”

Draco laughed, a small burst of it.

“My knowledge of celestial bodies is—extensive.”

He smiled.

She smiled.

The moment passed.

Astoria let out a small breath, her fragile hands reappearing from beneath the table to rest atop it.

“This is—uncomfortable,” she said. Draco nearly sank into his soup, so glad he hadn’t had to say it.

“Extremely.”

“Do you suppose your parents have elves listening in?”

“Almost certainly.”

“Well that’s a bit of a relief,” she said.

Draco raised a brow. He couldn’t fathom how having his family elves listen in on one of the most painfully awkward conversations of his life, with the intent to relay it to his parents, could be anything even remotely resembling a relief.

Astoria released a small giggle at his confusion, delicate like her bones. Only two years his junior? Gods the sound of that giggle, she seemed so young.

“I would imagine the only thing worse than participating in this conversation is having to hear about it.”

He leaned back against his chair, momentarily stunned. Not by her assessment of their conversation—objectively, it had been awful—but more at the touch of *schadenfreude* she’d just admitted to. He supposed some birds were carnivores, and she *had* been a Ravenclaw after all.

He tried to smile again, tried to find something he could offer the girl in front of him. But he couldn’t shake the niggling reminder that it hardly mattered what he offered her; he’d already have to give her his name, an heir—his stomach dropped. *Gods this was a nightmare.*

“I think it will get better,” she said, a curious pull between her brows as she watched him. He reached out to place his hand over hers, cautious in case she wanted to pull away. She didn’t, and for a moment, he wrapped his fingers around hers, trying not to focus on how brittle they felt in his grip.

“Of course it will,” he said, finally forcing that smile through, reaching his eyes. “We have—quite a while to figure it out.”

She smiled back at him and it looked nearly as forced as his own felt.

—

“Are you pouting?” Draco asked.

It was the first thing he noticed as he stepped through the Floo to Nott Manor; Theo had a frown firmly in place as he lounged on a chaise, a large sigh signaling that he’d heard the question.

“You’ve been back in the country for two full days and I’m only just now seeing you,” Theo said, swinging his legs to the floor, frown shifting into a scowl. “Of course I’m pouting.”

Draco dusted a mote of cinder from his trousers, trying to withhold the laugh he knew Theo expected for his antics.

He’d spent his first day back in the country exhausted from travel, tense from having to see his father again, and reeling from an unexpected and especially unwelcome betrothal. He’d spent the next day mentally preparing for, living through, and then decompressing from the uncomfortable experience of meeting his betrothed.

Finally with his friend and out from under his father’s thumb, Draco relaxed: shoulders dropping, chest unclenching, breath reaching the bottom of his lungs. He could be himself, he could feel normal; he needn’t obsess over every word he spoke and every action he took.

Theo stood and rolled his eyes.

“I’m going to hug you now,” he said, advancing.

“Must you?”

“A year is too fucking long. I’m giving you a hug.”

Draco allowed it. He couldn’t even bring himself to feign annoyance; he’d missed his friends. He’d missed this part of his life in England. The rest of it, the parts he’d had to endure during his first two days here? He could do without all that.

“Yes, yes. I missed you, too,” Draco said, disentangling himself and landing in the same spot on the chaise Theo had just vacated.

“You don’t owl enough,” Theo said.

Draco laughed, “My mother says the same.”

“Narcissa is a smart woman. Marriage to your father notwithstanding.”

“Yes, well. It would seem no one is perfect.”

The following quiet reminded Draco of the many moments when he realized his father was not, in fact, perfect. He knew Theo had surely experienced something similar with the late Nott patriarch.

“Get up,” Theo ordered.

“This is the first real chance I’m getting to relax since I got back.” A pause. A plea. “Don’t make me.”

“Sleeping in your Manor still troublesome?”

“Isn’t yours?”

Theo smiled, the face of opposition, “A literal nightmare. But we won’t let that stop us, will we? Get up.”

“I hate you.”

“No you don’t. I’m your best friend.”

Theo drew his wand.

“Planning on jinxing me, *best friend*? ” Draco asked with a lifted brow.

“If you don’t get up.”

“I pick Blaise as my new best friend.”

Theo tilted his head, wand not exactly pointed at Draco, but certainly not *not* pointed at him, either.

“That’s fair,” Theo conceded. “Blaise is probably my best friend, too. Speaking of, he’ll be here soon.” He sent a stinging jinx at Draco’s shoe.

“Shite, alright. I’m up,” he said, giving up on the idea that he might have a relaxing lounge, maybe even a nap. He should have known better; a welcome home from Theo was never going to be an

understated affair.

“That’s the spirit. Now come on, I want to show you my progress.”

Draco sighed, forcing himself to stand and follow Theo through the manor, stopping in front of an enormous floor-to-ceiling portrait of one of Theo’s long dead ancestors. They bore almost no resemblance to each other, severe where Theo was not, and whatever familial traits they shared had been long since diluted by the centuries and a torrential flooding of forward time.

Theo stopped at the far edge of the gilded gold frame and, with great fanfare and an enormous, shit-eating smile, pulled the frame away from the wall, sending it swinging on a hinge, and revealing a door behind.

“You got past the painting,” Draco said, brows lifted.

“I did,” Theo said, a near jump in his step as he approached the freshly revealed door. “And now watch this—” he placed his palm flat on the door.

Draco leaned against the opposite wall, fighting the urge to yawn, not from boredom, but from true, bone dragging exhaustion.

“What am I looking at?”

“I’m still alive,” Theo sounded thrilled, disproportionately so, at that statement. He tapped his fingers against the stone door, knocked it once, and then patted it fondly a few times.

“It was warded, I take it?”

Theo nodded, reaching for the portrait and swinging it closed again.

“I might’ve been a touch eager when I finally got the portrait to open. Melted most of my left hand. Blaise wasn’t happy.”

Draco had no room to judge, there were several similarly warded rooms and objects in his own family’s estate. But nevertheless—

“Your family was fucked up.” A valid assessment, either way.

Theo shrugged, still inordinately pleased with himself.

“I’m going to get into that vault even if it kills me. Who knows what kind of Nott treasures are hidden in there.”

“And fuck your father very much for not teaching you the wards before he died,” Draco supplied.

“Precisely. Also, while you’ve been off refining *your* skills on the continent, I’ve been doing the same.”

Draco arched a brow.

With a quick *accio* , Theo summoned something gold and glittering, flying down the long manor hallway.

“Please tell me it’s not another portkey,” Draco said. “I think I’m still dizzy from the last one you made me test.”

Theo rolled his eyes and held a chain up between them: dangling from it, something that looked suspiciously illegal, but damn if it wasn’t interesting.

“Theo is that a—” Draco took a step closer, feeling his eyes widen as he stared at the tiny hourglass enclosed in a golden cage.

“Time turner,” Theo confirmed, giving the chain a tiny swish, letting the turner sway between them.

“I have questions,” Draco said.

Theo laughed.

“Thought you would. Isn’t this better than a nap?”

Draco opted to ignore the jab.

“Where did you get it?”

“One of my father’s studies, wild repellent wards around it, so of course I had to look.”

Of course.

“What have you done to it?”

Theo frowned, retracting his arm that had been holding the time turner out between them. Draco hadn’t even noticed how close he’d walked until it was snatched away from his reach.

“What makes you so sure I’ve done something to it?”

Draco arched a brow and engaged in an impressive display of restraint by *not* rolling his eyes.

“Alright, I’ve done something to it.”

Draco’s brow stayed arched. Theo wouldn’t be able to resist showing off for long.

“It can *change* things. At least I think it can, I haven’t tested it yet.”

Draco took a small step back, both in awe and reasonable concern.

“When you say change...” Draco said.

“It doesn’t take you in a loop. It takes you somewhere else, restarts a timeline, probably breaks several laws of time travel Merlin himself would take issue with, but I’m almost certain that’s what it’ll do.”

Theo didn’t seem to notice Draco’s disbelief; he just stared at the hourglass on the chain as it dangled in the air, swinging back and forth between them, a literal and figurative pendulum. Theo tore his gaze from the time turner.

“I’ve been waiting for you to get back—I didn’t, well, I haven’t told Blaise about it.”

No, Draco couldn’t imagine he would have. As a side effect of having a touch of Sight, Blaise tended to be exceptionally cautious about the future and the things that could impact it.

Draco let out a long breath, shaking his head from side to side, mostly out of disbelief. He ran a hand through his hair.

“Shit. Theo. The Department of Mysteries has no idea what they missed out on.”

Theo’s smile dropped, twisting—just for a moment—into something resembling a frown.

“Well, since they didn’t want to hire me, I’m putting my talents to personal use instead.”

“I have another question,” Draco said, throwing caution to the wind, feeling reckless. “Are we going to test it?”

“Can’t. Not yet,” Theo said, looking genuinely disappointed. “Still have a bit of fiddling to do. But soon,” he sighed through a smile. “I

knew I could count on you to do something stupid with me.”

Draco knew it was a stupid thing to do, downright idiotic, to be honest. But if he was meant to carry on a family legacy, marry a stranger, and rot in the mausoleum of a manor he had the honor of calling his own, he could at least permit himself a sliver of idiocy, powered by intense curiosity.

“Well, if you can get it working before next month maybe you can get me out of the Ministry’s fucking decommissioning project.”

“Malfoy Manor is up?”

“Starts next month.”

Theo wound the time turner’s gold chain around the broad surface of his palm—once, twice, three times—until he held the tiny hourglass in his fist. It looked so much smaller there, more like a toy and less like the exceedingly illegal experimental bit of magic it actually was.

“So—they found someone willing to take on your estate, then?” Theo said. Then, with a scoff, “Only took them four years.”

The time turner disappeared into Theo’s pocket. Draco couldn’t break his gaze from the glints of gold as it moved.

Draco snorted. They’d certainly found *someone* to tackle Malfoy Manor.

“I take it Lucius isn’t pleased either?” Theo asked before he summoned a house elf, requesting champagne. The elf appeared and disappeared in a *crack* .

“I could hear him yelling through the Floo from a different wing when they told him who’s working our estate.”

“Well?” Theo prompted. “Who is it?”

“Hermione Granger.”

Theo didn’t say anything, not at first. He shifted on his feet and Draco heard the chain from the time turner sliding in his pocket, reminding Draco of its presence.

“What the fuck are they thinking?”

Draco didn’t know. He’d wondered the same thing when his mother

told him, explaining away his father's ire with excuses about surprise, and stress, and disrespect of their family home. But it made no sense that they would send a witch who'd been tortured there, who had such an unfortunate and intimate history with the property and the family tied to it.

While, quite unfortunately, the number of people who experienced torture in his home was decidedly more than zero, all three current occupants included, it didn't seem like it would be an impossible task to find a competent soul who had *not* experienced such a thing at his home to do the job.

"Hermione Granger," Theo parroted, something wistful, awestruck in his voice. "She's going to be at it for years."

"The thought occurred to me."

"No, really," Theo continued, "between how much insane shit your family has collected over the years and her—let's call it attention to detail—it'll be years before the Ministry let's the manor go."

Draco flexed his jaw, completely aware of all these things. They were some of the first he'd thought, too.

"Think she's still as awful as she used to be?" Theo asked.

"I doubt she can be worse."

Draco's nails dug into his palm, stinging: a fist he hadn't even realized he'd made.

"We're not as awful as we used to be," Theo said.

"I don't have any plans to call her names, if that's what you're suggesting."

"I know that. Maybe you could—tell her some of—"

"Not happening."

Theo gave a small smile, forced and stiff. He nodded.

The elf reappeared with a bottle of champagne. Theo let out a relieved noise as he accepted a glass, thanking the elf profusely, and then forced champagne into Draco's hands.

"Well—welcome back," Theo said with a small lift of his glass in toast,

face twisting towards pity. “Maybe it won’t be as bad as you think?”

Draco laughed, downing his champagne in a single gulp, wincing at the assault of bubbles against his throat.

“Maybe you should get that time turner working and we can avoid Granger and the decommissioning altogether.”

“You say we—”

“I sat in front of this painting and watched you try to dismantle these wards for two years. If I have to suffer through Hermione Granger gutting my ancestral home, your job is to distract me.”

Theo frowned.

“She did testify for you.”

Draco frowned, too.

“I’m planning on avoiding her as much as I can. I might not even notice her if I try hard enough.”

Theo pulled the time turner from his pocket, letting it swing from his fingers again.

“What would you change?” Draco asked, distracted by the glinting metal once again.

Theo shrugged.

“Not sure. Don’t know. It’s a lot of pressure, isn’t it? The idea of changing something. You?”

“I don’t know. All of it? None of it? Enough?” Draco said. He knew what Theo meant. The idea of changing time, suddenly so big, so all encompassing, felt completely surreal.

“Well, we have time to figure it out.”

Draco almost jolted, hit so fiercely by the same words he’d said to Astoria the day before.

Theo offered him a wink, clearly unaware of the small shock he’d just delivered to Draco’s system, “I’ll try to have it done before Granger blows up your life.”

Perhaps that's the moment he would change: find a way to keep Granger away from his home. Or maybe he'd go for something smaller, like the lie he'd told Astoria: that they'd figure it out. Or maybe he'd pick the moment he got back to Wiltshire and where instead of marching straight into his Father's office, he'd waited to be summoned. Or perhaps further back, during the war, before the war. So many moments. Not enough time.

Chapter 2: -3.000, -3.083, -3.166

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

February

tick

Draco paced, relentlessly so, the morning Hermione Granger was meant to arrive at the manor and begin sifting through centuries of cursed, jinxed, and generally unsafe collectibles. He woke early: nervous. He failed to eat breakfast: nervous. And he hovered near the Floo: nervous.

For as much as he insisted on wanting nothing to do with her, as much as he reminded Theo and Blaise on a daily basis how disinterested he was in whatever gutting she'd be doing to his family home, as much as he tried to convey—patiently, oh so patiently—to Astoria *why* Granger's imminent insertion into his life had him so agitated, he couldn't seem to explain away his morbid curiosity on the day of.

He'd started having nightmares again, too. Not every night, and not always bad enough that he couldn't fall back to sleep, but disruptive nevertheless. Brewing potions became his relief from exhaustion, or rather, something to focus on instead of it. He brewed in nearly all his free time, often in the middle of the night to order to escape the lure of sleep that would not come. He'd cobbled together something only tacitly resembling a potions lab in one of the manor's many spare spaces. His brewing once again became an obsessive hobby, one he used to distract himself from constantly questioning *why* he'd bothered to return to Wiltshire at all.

There had been something revelatory, transcendent, about realizing he'd left more than his history behind in England; he'd left his nightmares, too. After a year without them, he'd grown accustomed to something that looked suspiciously like quality sleep. Miraculously, he'd finally managed to rid his face of the dark circles under his eyes, haunting him since sixth year.

But the nightmares and the dark circles had returned. And so, in

addition to his rampant nervous energy, exhaustion weighed Draco down as well.

Would Granger hex him on sight? Would she hex *his father* on sight? That wouldn't be the worst thing, honestly, and might very well be worth the opportunity to witness.

But Lucius had ordered Draco to steer clear of the main Floo parlor where he planned to receive her. Draco would have no part in the decommissioning process; his father would oversee, observe, and ensure that no Ministry overreach took place. And if Draco had been agitated over the past month, Lucius had been outright nasty.

"Remove yourself," Lucius snapped, entering the parlor where Draco had given up his pacing in favor of sitting on an antique velvet sofa near the Floo, pretending to read a book on rare potions ingredients. Draco glanced up at his father, eyes straining to refocus. He hesitated for a moment too long. Lucius turned away from the Floo with a sharp pivot, black robes moving with him. His cane clicked as it came down on the stone floors with an irritated, familiar force. "Now, Draco. I will not have you interfering."

Draco closed his book, slamming his will to retort between the pages: as if either of their faces would be a welcome sight to Hermione Granger. He held his tongue. It wasn't worth the fight, nor the effort. Not right now.

He rose, noting how the features on his father's face relaxed, pleased—always pleased—at Draco's compliance.

He left the parlor, closing the heavy wooden door behind him, and proceeded to run directly into Theo. He stumbled, startled and thrown off kilter by Theo's unexpected and uninvited presence in his home.

"Is she here yet?" Theo asked, eyes wandering around Draco's shoulder as if he might be able to see through the door.

"No, not yet—Theo, how did you get through the wards if you didn't Floo?"

Theo laughed, reaching a hand in his pocket and withdrawing a familiar golden metal object.

"I've spent almost four years trying to break into my family's most paranoid wards." Theo's eyes landed back on Draco, a brow raised, assessing. "I keyed myself into your family wards while you were gone

—for practice.”

“Practice?”

“Also for fun.”

Draco snorted, that seemed much more likely. “I don’t understand how I got more NEWTs than you.”

“Because you actually tried,” Theo said. “And potions is a pain in the arse. I don’t know how you can stand it.”

Draco gave Theo a light shove, eyes stuck on the time turner dangling from Theo’s hand. Theo caught the direction of his gaze, lifting the glinting object.

“So. It’s done,” Theo said, allowing the tiny hourglass to hang between them. His statement sounded more like a question, like he didn’t quite know.

“Done?”

“As done as it can be without trying it out.” Theo hesitated and cleared his throat. “I should also probably mention that your father might have been the one to ask me to make this.”

Draco stiffened, hands curling into fists at his sides.

“Might have, Theo?”

“He owled last year, asking if it was possible. He knew I’d been rejected by the DoM—not sure if you’d mentioned my tinkering. Anyway—” Theo broke off, swinging the time turner between them, staring at it. “It got me thinking, then I started messing around. I told him it would take years, but—you know. It didn’t.” Theo shrugged.

“Don’t give it to him,” Draco said, amusement and curiosity dampened by the power dangling from a chain between them. Lucius Malfoy did not need that kind of power.

“I wasn’t going to. I’m not—totally sure why I even finished it. Probably just to see if I could.”

They both stared at it. Too long. Curiosity cracked like felled timber between them, bad decisions sparking on the kindling.

“But we could try it?” Draco asked: quietly, carefully. “Just to see if it

works?”

Theo slackened, “Thank gods. I knew you were my best friend for a reason.”

“I thought Blaise was your best friend?”

“Only when you’re being disagreeable. Which is usually. But right now, you’re definitely my best friend.”

“We shouldn’t go far,” Draco said, trying to force something reasonable and mature into what was already shaping up to be an extremely irresponsible decision. But he couldn’t stop looking at the time turner, curiosity eating away at the edges of his control. He just—he wanted to know. “And we shouldn’t change much.”

Theo’s shoulders fell, just a fraction, but he nodded. “As fun as it sounds, traveling years back in time, you’re probably right. If it brings us back after five minutes I’ll know my modifications worked. I even did some work with paradox avoidance, but I don’t much fancy testing that out. More of a fail safe.”

The sound of the Floo roaring to life on the other side of the door drew Draco’s attention. Muffled voices floated through the paneled wood, tension practically lashing in waves.

Draco startled at the sudden shout. More muffled voices, his father’s laugh—far from joyful—toxic as it seeped through the border between rooms, a crack of magic, a woman’s shout—had to be Granger—followed finally by the sound of the Floo again.

Theo shoved the time turner into his pocket a breath before Lucius appeared at the door, swinging it open, a rush of air from the force of it billowed his robes. Draco blinked, waiting for the implication that they’d been eavesdropping, waiting for ire and chastisement.

His father only sneered, a curl in his lip, nostrils flaring.

“Theodore,” he said.

“Mr. Malfoy.”

With only a brief look between the two of them, frustration palpable, Lucius left them standing there and stalked down the hall. Draco watched until Lucius rounded a corner, the tap of his cane against the stone floors fading as he disappeared from sight and sound. Turning,

Draco glanced into the parlor, ominously empty of any Ministry representatives, by the name of Granger or otherwise.

“We could fuck with your father?” came Theo’s voice behind him.

Draco laughed, an inelegant, surprised sound, as he turned back around. “Yes, let’s.”

—

Forced into close proximity with Theo, gold chain strung around both their necks, Draco tried not to let his nervousness show, simmering just beneath his skin.

“This is a bad idea,” he said.

“It is.”

“Why are we doing it again?”

Theo’s shoulders rose and fell, a noncommittal kind of response that quite literally brushed up against Draco’s side.

“Lost youth? Tendencies towards self destruction? Poorly managed impulse control?”

Draco stared. All three were probably accurate, and then some.

“We won’t change much,” Draco said. “Something stupid, inconsequential.”

Theo smiled, youthful and mischievous. For a moment, Draco didn’t feel like a twenty-one year old wizard on the other side of a war, financially bound to an estate and a family failing to modernize, and saddled with a fiancé with whom conversation floundered and died like rotted fish.

Instead, he felt a bit like an idiot. It was wonderful.

“We’re stealing his cane,” Theo said, not waiting for confirmation or agreement. He held the time turner at eye level between them. Carefully, he rotated a small gear on one side. “It has two orientations,” he said. “Years and hours. We—definitely don’t want to

accidentally turn back years, not this time, at least.” He winked, and the flippancy felt forced.

Draco drew a deep breath as he watched Theo flip the turner a single time, a single hour.

The world shifted, blurred, buzzed. Pressure like cotton in Draco’s ears, dulling, and then suddenly removed, bringing sound back into focus. Draco blinked against the gossamer quality in the air around him, a film he couldn’t shake. Then it dissipated, and everything looked and sounded perfectly normal.

“Where are you right now?” Theo asked and Draco’s brain flipped, calculating the meaning of that question.

He glanced at the door behind him, now closed again.

“In there, pretending I’m not nervous about seeing Granger again.”

Theo made a tiny noise of triumph.

“I knew that’s why you’ve been extra agitated lately. We have five minutes until it pulls us back and we see what’s changed.”

Draco tugged the chain from his neck and grabbed Theo by the elbow, pulling him into another room.

“Right, okay—” he started, not knowing what to do now that he’d landed in the past.

Where Draco felt like he might panic, Theo looked downright elated, an enormous grin splitting his face and more animation behind his eyes than Draco had seen in quite some time. Theo laughed, then immediately covered his mouth, stifling the sound.

“We should call for an elf,” Theo said, barely containing his joy as it teetered towards mania. He bounced on the balls of his feet, pacing circles in the small sitting room, regarding their surroundings with a kind of wonder, as if their hiding spot looked any different an hour in the past.

Draco shook his head but called for the elf anyway.

Crack

“Yes, Master Draco?”

Theo stepped forward, extending an overdramatic hand as he bowed to the elf.

“Topsy, lovely to see you. Mopsy sends her regards from the Nott Estate.”

Topsy’s eyes, already impossibly huge, widened. Draco merely sighed.

“Could you do us a favor and bring us Master Lucius’s cane?” Theo asked.

Topsy trained her enormous eyes on Draco, awaiting confirmation that this was his wish. Try as Theo might to endear himself to the Malfoy elves, family magic prevented them from following his orders without approval from a Malfoy.

“Yes, Topsy—”

“If you’d be so kind,” Theo interrupted.

Draco gave him an elbow to the ribs as the elf disappeared.

“You can’t override elf magic with charm,” he said.

Theo sighed, “You know, the Department of Mysteries said I couldn’t make a portkey precise enough to travel inside buildings, too.”

“Yes, you’re very impressive.”

Theo laughed, feigning humility with a half shrug.

“Mostly I just have a lot of time.”

Crack .

Topsy returned with Lucius’s cane in her hands, comically huge compared to her tiny frame.

“Thank you, Topsy,” Draco said, taking it from her. “You may go.”

The elf vanished, leaving Draco holding his father’s cane, staring at Theo.

“Three minutes,” Theo said, holding the turner up to examine.

“Well, now what?”

They looked at each other; a nearby grandfather clock ticked away the remaining seconds of their time in this experiment. Draco burst out laughing.

“We’re idiots. This is the stupidest thing we’ve ever done.”

Theo doubled over, clutching the time turner to his chest, laughing just as hard.

“He *can* walk without it, can’t he?” he asked, gasping through his laughter, gesturing blindly towards the cane.

Draco tapped it on the floor, feeling ridiculous. He had to wipe a tear from the corner of his eye. His skin felt stretched, something like pinpricks beneath the surface, surging with each gulp of air, smile cracking his face wide open.

“Yes—he can.” It felt like a dam breaking, flood waters rushing in; he hadn’t laughed like this in years. Not while he studied for his potions mastery, relegated to Europe’s far edges to find someone—anyone—willing to mentor him. Not while he avoided his parents during his second year under house arrest, or while studying for his NEWTs during his first. Not during the three months he spent in Azkaban awaiting his trial. Certainly not anytime in 1998, broadly speaking. How long ago was that now? Years. And not a moment of laughter, not like this, that he could find inside them.

He held the cane up, examining it and all the absurdity it represented.

“It’s just for show,” he said. “It used to hold his wand but since he can’t use magic during his probation it’s just—a prop, I suppose. A habit.”

Draco’s ears piqued at the sound of footsteps in the adjacent corridor.

Theo clutched his side, laughter dimming. His eyes went wide, chest still shaking from tiny bouts of suppressed glee as they silently decided what they might do next.

“I supposed I’ll just—give it back?”

Theo rolled his eyes, “You’d think between the two of us—actual Death Eater, son of a Death Eater—we’d be better at causing trouble.”

“Well, we were always the reluctant sort, weren’t we?”

The footsteps in the corridor grew closer.

“Think he’s wondering where it went?” Theo asked. “Perhaps he’ll appreciate you returning it?”

Draco nearly scoffed. He couldn’t remember the last time Lucius expressed genuine appreciation for anything. False appreciation, a pureblooded aristocratic version laced with a sense of expectation nullifying any actual gratitude: *that*, Lucius had in droves. Did relief that Draco hadn’t died in a battle they’d been on the losing side of count as appreciation?

With a sigh and a shrug and a *one minute* warning from Theo, Draco stepped into the corridor.

His stomach dropped; he realized they’d already changed something. *Before*, Lucius hadn’t arrived at the parlor until nearly the time Granger was meant to arrive. But now, they’d somehow spurred him into action, into arriving early.

“Father,” he said, greeting Lucius from several feet away, nearly at the door to the parlor already. Draco held up the cane and immediately froze, brain grappling for a lie to explain away why he had it. Lucius stalked forward and took it in a single swipe, eyes narrowed at Draco. “Thought you may want this,” Draco finally said. Not exactly a lie, technically the truth, and the best he could come up with on such short notice as the dying remnants of euphoria sizzled through his brain. Lucius watched him, eyes still narrowed, and then his shoulders dropped.

“Come, Draco.”

He thought he’d imagined it at first, the nod Lucius made towards the door behind them, and the heavy implication that Draco should follow. Suddenly, he’d been invited to the very thing he’d been formerly banished from.

Then the panic gripped him.

What would happen when his father opened the door and found another version of Draco sitting and failing to read?

He launched himself forward, but not fast enough; the door to the parlor swung open. Draco closed his eyes, opened them again, and found he was the only version of himself in sight. *Paradox avoidance* barreled through his brain.

Then time lurched, that feeling of cotton over his ears, a film over his eyes, the world blurring and spinning. Five minutes had passed in what felt like a blink, a breath.

Draco wasn't standing in the same place anymore. He now stood near the sofa, by the Floo, slightly behind a mass of brown curls practically alight with furious magic. He knew that bush of brown hair. He'd been subjected to it for years at school; it was all the confirmation he needed that Hermione Granger was indeed the Ministry representative handling his family estate.

From the looks of it—opposite whatever span of time he'd just skipped forward to—it wasn't going well. He shook his head, trying to dislodge his disorientation.

Draco took a small step forward so that he could see Granger in profile, his father, too, towering across from her at his full height, posture so forced that Draco nearly cringed.

"I will summon an auror if I must, Mr. Malfoy."

Granger spoke quietly, voice barely wavering, but everything about her posture—from her wide stance, to her lifted chin, to her fingers flexing around her wand—screamed of fury, of barely contained rage battling against her bones. Draco had almost forgotten the amount of authority the bossy little witch could force into such a small package.

His father merely blinked, unfazed.

"I will not allow unsupervised access to my home," Lucius said, voice dripping with a venom Draco knew well. That tone still made Draco tense, holding his breath in his chest, just for a beat, while he waited to see what came next.

"And I will not allow interference in a Ministry-mandated process being executed per the terms of your family's probation. This manor is unsafe—infested with dark magic and dark artifacts. It's being addressed regardless of your wishes."

Draco suppressed a smirk. She might be an obnoxious swot, but he

could appreciate anyone who went toe to toe with his father. His smirk sank, though, when he realized she'd spoken to his father in the same way Draco wished he could. Careless, indifferent to the response. Not bound by familial duty or a near literal yolk of financial dependence.

"You will not be granted access to a single room of this home without my presence," Lucius seethed, hand flexing on the head of his cane where a wand once lived.

Granger released a strangled sort of noise, halfway between a frustrated groan and a growl. Draco failed to hold back a laugh.

She spun on him. Her right hand jerked, one quick motion away from raising her wand at him. He hadn't seen Hermione Granger in the flesh since his trial, when she'd testified on a stand in front of the Wizengamot and he, bound in chains behind bars, had been only partly lucid from months spent in Azkaban.

She looked the same as he remembered from Hogwarts, enormous hair overtaking everything else one might notice about her. It looked alive, spirals flying away from her face at the momentum in her movement. He wondered, in a dim, snide corner of his mind, if she'd even notice if pixies moved in and made a nest. He might have said something equally as sneering, too, if her furious gaze hadn't so thoroughly pinned him in place.

"I don't want to hear a word out of you, Malfoy," she said, right hand still flexing, wand ready for a fight.

Draco wanted to say something clever, or at least modestly so, about there being two Malfoys in the room: surely the ambiguousness would annoy her precise, detail-obsessed brain, but Lucius cut in, forcing her attention away again.

"You will not speak to any member of this household in that way. Being raised by animals does not excuse your lack of proper manners —"

It happened before Draco even realized it.

His heart flipped, or sank, or otherwise made its machinations known in a way wholly unusual to its normal operation. Then the heat flooded him, from the center of his chest to the tips of his fingers and the balls of his feet. It crawled up his neck and face, likely painting visible streaks of red across his skin.

As if by *imperio* , he spoke two little syllables, expelled from his lungs before he could even consider taking them back.

“Father—”

“Don’t interrupt me.”

Lucius snapped his attention to Draco, and Granger did the same; both watching him. It was a sharp, short order, and it cut straight to the child inside Draco who’d heard that tone more times than he could count. Don’t interrupt your father. Your father knows best. You must respect your father. Your father has your best interests in mind. You must take this Dark Mark for your father.

Granger’s fury seemed to melt under the heat of curiosity, while his father’s only grew.

Draco folded under the pressure. He wanted to say more, say *something* . But his throat closed up, panic creeping in, guilt washing him out.

“I was raised by muggles, Mr. Malfoy, not animals,” Granger said, looking away from Draco with only a flicker of distaste.

Lucius laughed, that same toxic-laden laugh Draco had heard in another version of these events, in another timeline altogether. Was it overlap, coincidence, or convergence? Draco resisted the urge to shiver, to acknowledge the discomfort that enveloped him, whispering of paradox avoidance, broken timelines, and the power of a single change.

Lucius brought the tip of his cane to the floor, less of a *click* on stone than a stake in the ground, a crack in a facade.

Draco winced, watching the cane, intimately knowing the force it could wield.

“I suppose you are correct. The current Ministry leadership does seem quite concerned about terminology these days. For example, the term I’d use to describe you has fallen out of favor. Pity.”

Lucius didn’t say it outright, but he’d thrown the word at her, hurled in the space between them. *Mudblood*. Draco’s ears rang with the echo of something that hadn’t even been spoken out loud.

He hated that word. Truly hated it. His entire life had once centered

around it, around hating those to whom it applied. It had been a disease introduced to his system at a young age and given every opportunity to grow and spread until it nearly killed him. Even now, his life still revolved around it, constantly fighting off the after-effects of infection, never knowing how he should react to hearing it, to saying it, to thinking it.

Granger had gone pale, breathing heavily, wand pointed at Lucius. And while the threat to his father should have offended Draco, it didn't. Nevermind that she could have avoided this confrontation altogether if she didn't insist on such self-righteousness.

"I will not work with you, Mr. Malfoy. You'll be hearing from the Ministry."

She sounded shaken. Draco felt something of the same. The air in the room suddenly stifled, brimming with anger and magic and disappointment in three distinct flavors, all of them stale and sour in his mouth.

Granger turned to him, nostrils flaring, lips pursed, eyes flashing. She lowered her wand, infinitesimally, but enough. She looked like she might say something. He felt like he should. Neither of them did.

She just looked at him, and he at her, until she spun around, helping herself to a handful of Floo powder and disappearing in a green flash.

Draco knew what came next. He sighed, sitting on the nearby sofa and prepared for a lengthy lecture on family loyalty, on speaking out of turn, on respect, and his duty to his name: whatever transgressions he'd flaunted by interrupting his father in front of a Ministry employee, even if that employee had been Hermione Granger.

All the while, he couldn't help thinking how much he preferred the original version of the future—present, past, whatever it was now—before he'd stumbled into disrespecting his father, his name, his legacy.

—

A Ministry owl arrived later that evening, delivering a strongly-worded letter from the head of the Dark Artifact Decommissioning

Task Force, undersigned by the Minister of Magic himself: Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy were to have no part or presence in the decommissioning of the Malfoy Estate. If—and the *if* was heavily emphasized—the family required a representative for the process, Draco would be the only one permitted in the same room as Granger.

And thus went any hopes Draco had of avoiding her altogether. He'd been toying with the idea of finding employment as a means to escape the manor and Lucius's financial will. Instead, he'd been tethered more closely to it. His father would insist Draco observe Granger every second she worked in their home.

That night, Draco fell asleep cursing Granger's hot headedness. If she hadn't been so difficult, so contrarian—as if Lucius wanting to supervise the gutting of his home could possibly be a surprise—then Draco wouldn't be stuck babysitting her swotty arse for the foreseeable future.

Draco went through the motions the next morning: taking breakfast with his parents, finding he had nothing to say to them, listening as his father listed the things the Ministry was under no circumstances allowed access to, and finding he had nothing to say to that, either.

He left breakfast already exhausted, apprehension weighing him down by the time he closed the parlor door behind him, only marginally confident his father had retired to another wing. His mother, he knew, had decided to spend the day in the gardens, well out of sight and out of mind.

Draco stood in front of the Floo, felt out of place, and opted to sit instead. He leaned against the back of the sofa. Crossed his arms. Uncrossed them. Tapped his foot. Forced himself to stop.

The Floo flared green and Granger stepped through. She held her wand in her hand as he watched her survey the room with a cautious efficiency. When her eyes finally landed on him, he stood. Draco didn't know what to do with his arms, troublesome things: hands that kept flexing, limbs he didn't know whether to swing or cross or pretend didn't exist at all.

He opted to pretend they didn't exist. Instead, he inclined his head, a small nod, mouth tight as he forced a simple nicety through.

“Granger.”

“Malfoy.”

He opened his mouth to say something else, but she cut him off.

“Don’t, Malfoy. I know you hate this—hate me.” A pause, a sigh, a scowl. “The feeling is mutual. But we’re stuck here so just—don’t.”

He was almost grateful. He didn’t know what he would have said, if she’d let him. She waited a moment, perhaps to see if he intended to fight her assessment. When he didn’t, she pocketed her wand and pushed up her sleeves, preparing to dig into her work.

He froze when he saw it, focus latched onto eight letters carved into her arm: no glamour, no attempt to hide it, nothing.

Draco went from pretending his arms didn’t exist to feeling like his entire body had dropped out of existence: unwilling disillusionment as if someone had cast a spell on him without his consent. In a faraway corner of his mind, he heard her screaming, begging, crying.

He isolated the panic seizing his veins and lungs, freezing it out, slamming down his Occlumency, shattering shard after shard of unbidden memory forcing its way to the forefront of his mind.

He blinked, flaking away every last fleck of rising panic that struck him. What the fuck was she thinking? Anger joined the panic, a fresh flush of heat beneath his skin. He cooled that too, forced it down, flaked it away. *Fuck* .

He generally made a point not to think about the consequences of the cursed blade Bellatrix liked to play with, what it meant for the skin of someone subjected to it. His jaw ached from the force he used to grind it shut: tooth to tooth, tongue smashed against his palate.

Finally, as a sense of calm numbed the horror, numbed the memory darkening the edges of his vision, Draco tore his eyes from the letters on her arm. He met her gaze and found nothing but confusion and suspicion reflected at him. She looked like she might say something, fight him on his reaction, or question him on it. Surely it hadn’t gone unnoticed. He might have stopped breathing for a full minute, now that he thought about it.

He drew in air, a tingle of relief emanating from his chest.

She kept watching him, brows pulled together, hair wild around her face, sleeves still pushed up. Without a word, she pulled out her wand again and cast a spell. Several runes appeared in front of her, glowing in varying shades of orange, red, and yellow, with a few purple

symbols hovering at the edges.

Draco had never seen a spell like it; even through the cloud of Occlumency forcibly holding his nerves together, a type of spell-o tape for his broken pieces, he found the novel magic mesmerizing.

Granger sighed and cancelled the spell, looking at him again.

“We’ll start in this room, then,” she said, gesturing to the velvet sofa behind him. “That green monstrosity is drowning in residual dark magic.”

Draco stepped away from it, confusion crystalizing from behind his shields. He opted to stand near the fireplace, observing with his arms limp and heavy at his sides.

“I sat on this sofa today; it did me no harm.” His voice came out even, if a little lifeless.

Granger approached the sofa and cast another charm, working with enviable ease and precision as she consulted the various diagnostic runes around the piece of furniture.

“It’s not offensive dark magic.” Her tone lacked the level serenity his Occlumency provided. She sounded irritated, on edge, riled. “Most of what I’ll be dealing with here won’t be. It’s leeching magic, darkness that takes up residence and doesn’t let go.”

She didn’t look at him when she spoke; she merely kept working, delivering her facts with an annoyance coating her academic tone. That might have upset him, irritated him, if not for the forced calm freezing his blood.

She worked for hours. He watched for just as long, standing by the fireplace, back aching and stiff, but somehow unable to move. He had to unclench his fists on several occasions, remind himself to breathe, keep from passing out under the force of so much sustained magic managing his mind.

Slowly, the runes from her diagnostic spell turned purple with more frequency, one by one, as she moved from the sofa, to several books, to a clock, to a desk drawer that kept stinging her, until Granger declared her work done for the day, wiping a thin sheen of sweat from her brow, hair fluffed even bigger than it had been when she arrived.

Draco looked to the clock in the room; it neared seven in the evening.

She'd worked through lunch and the end of a normal workday. And he'd occluded straight through all of it, barely moving in hours. His knees ached at the realization.

She looked at him, brows drawn together. She opened her mouth, paused, and then barred her teeth around words she ultimately swallowed back. Draco tensed, prepared to employ however much Occlumency it took to survive this encounter. She pocketed her wand and left through the Floo without a word.

The moment the green light faded, Draco crossed the room in several purposeful strides, throwing open the doors that had remained closed the entire day. They hadn't even made it out of the room she'd been received in.

He strode down the Manor halls, still heavily occluding and only tangentially aware that his father probably expected him to report on what the Ministry had touched. Dimmer still, in a deeper part of his mind and struggling through his occlusion, Draco wondered why removing residual dark magic from furniture was such a problem? Why did his father resist it so much?

He stopped in front of a set of double doors, belatedly realizing where his feet had carried him.

He lifted his hand against the wood, crackling wards stinging at his skin, warning him to keep out, to stay away, shouting that this room was off limits and always would be. But if Draco closed his eyes, he could see through the magic, through the ebb and flow of it, the push and the pull. He could slip between the charms and sidestep the hexes, wedging himself between the wards and into the drawing room he hadn't seen in years. He could imagine it, perfectly, just as it had been that day.

Heavy drapes, deep purple walls. A shattered chandelier and carpets drenched in blood. Where everything changed, the first time he'd almost said *no* .

A surge of fear seared his lungs. With a deep breath through his nose, Draco forced it away, forced it down, froze it out.

"Draco?" his mother's voice pulled him from the door. He let his hand, prickling and stinging, drop from the wood. Narcissa stood next to him. She reached out, a brief touch of her hand against his own before she retracted. "How was it?" she asked.

Draco respected his mother too much to laugh at her; he just looked at the door next to them. They both knew what lived on the other side.

“Fine, Mother.”

His mother’s eyes were blue, disbelieving. Her eyes surprised Draco sometimes, so used to his own shade of gray, almost identical to his father’s. Why couldn’t he have inherited hers instead? She watched him, a touch of a frown curling at her lip. He knew she saw his occlusion.

“And you?” she asked. “How are you?”

“Fine, Mother,” he repeated, voice sounding flat even to his own ears.

“Your father wishes to speak with you.” She reached her hand out again, not making contact, merely an attempt at a gesture. “Are you available now?”

No .

“Yes, Mother.”

He let her steer him away, through the halls of his childhood home, clinging to his Occlumency with every shred of mental energy he had left.

Chapter End Notes

y'all i can't even begin to express the gratitude i have for the absolutely lovely reception the first chapter of this story received! i am so beyond thrilled that folks are excited to go on this wild ride with me! thank you all so, so very much for your kudos and comments and asks and messages; they mean the world to me! i hope you enjoyed chapter two just as much! <3

Chapter 3: -2.916, -3.000, -3.083

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

March

tock

Draco sat on the tufted green velvet sofa in the Floo parlor, recently removed of its lingering dark magic stains, and nearly occluded himself into unconsciousness.

Granger worked on the other side of the room, letting out occasional huffs of frustration that would have annoyed him if he hadn't whittled his emotional range down to nothing more than an eerie placidity. She'd been stuck working on the piano for nearly three weeks. Every day, she arrived—slur carved in her arm on full display—and worked non-stop until she left. Draco sat and read, or lounged and read, or pretended not to nap while he read, as he supervised her efforts to avoid being bitten by piano ivories.

He felt a little sick, stomach unsettled from the fog in his brain, a cross between willing *confundus* and an exceptionally strong Calming Draught. It was a strange thing, he'd realized, not being annoyed by Granger, not feeling anything towards her at all. She'd been such a source of irritation for so long that he could never have imagined being able to sit in the same room with her for multiple weeks without wanting to throw insults or pick a fight. Instead, he spent a great deal of time staring at the back of her head, marveling at her hair's ability to simply *exist* in the state it did, and occasionally experimenting with pulling back on his Occlumency to see how instantaneously his anger surged.

That feeling of nothingness towards her could only exist when he'd frozen out every other emotion. But Occlumency exhausted him, literally and figuratively. He tried pulling back on his shields again, releasing some of his hold, letting the freeze thaw, just a bit.

Granger's frustrated sigh tore through him, rippling through his veins. He couldn't even see the *mudblood* scar, but he knew it was there, in the room with them, taunting him. At least she'd worn long sleeves

today and hadn't pushed them up; the barrier helped.

They'd barely spoken a word in the weeks they'd spent in this parlor. Between Draco's occlusion and her general reluctance to even look at him, conversation topics were scant.

He let out a sigh of his own and fell back against the arm of the sofa, propping his legs up and committing to a true lounge as he relished in the tiny relief that letting go of some of his Occlumency gave him.

"You know," he said, testing the waters. Boredom had leached normal impulse control from his brain. Predictably, her shoulders tensed at the sound of his voice. She didn't turn towards him, just kept staring at the angry red and orange diagnostic runes floating around her while she massaged what must have been sore fingers from the piano. "If you can ever get that piano to stop biting you, there's another drawer in the bureau desk that won't even let *me* open it."

Granger's shoulders, which had risen when she tensed, fell. She didn't turn around, but she surprised him by speaking.

"I'm sure I'll get to it eventually, Malfoy."

"It's just," he started, and nearly smirked at the small puff of annoyance that slipped from her mouth. He stared at her back and the halo of hair surrounding her. He let his Occlumency melt a little further. "I'm fairly certain something of sentimental value ended up in there, years ago. I wouldn't mind having it back."

She finally turned to look at him. He'd been wrong; she *had* pushed her sleeves up, just enough that *blood* peeked out from her sleeve. Draco took a breath, his throat tightening. He willed the ice back into his veins, sealing up the openings he'd made for attempted conversation.

"What is it?" she asked.

"None of your business."

"Well I'm going to see it anyway if I have to break it out of a bureau."

"That doesn't make you entitled to anything here, Granger."

He'd wanted his words to have more bite, to sound as annoyed as he felt at the sight of that fucking scar she kept flaunting. But instead they fell flat, disinterested under the weight of Occlumency. She

narrowed her eyes; he did the same.

“You don’t have to be here if you can’t stand me, you know,” she said.

“Would you like to revisit that with my father? He doesn’t trust the Ministry not to rob us of everything we have left on a good day. He doesn’t trust *you* on any day.”

Granger flinched as one of the keys clamped down on her forefinger. She winced, sticking the tip of it between her lips, sucking as she made tiny mollifying sounds to herself.

Draco’s gaze lingered on the action, too long—he knew it was too long—but he couldn’t seem to pull himself away. Annoyed, he chipped away at that shard of frustration, that unwelcome bubble of intrusive lust, sinking into an even more heavily occluded state.

She pulled her finger from her mouth.

“This is my job, Malfoy. I’m sorry your father doesn’t like it. I’m not especially pleased to be here, either.”

“And I’m not pleased I have to babysit you,” he said, but he could hear the lack of punch, dulled by slow senses and frozen veins.

She let out a strangled, disbelieving sort of sound he might hesitantly label a laugh. She covered her mouth with her hand almost immediately. He tried again. Boredom might be preferable to anger, but verbal sparring was better than boredom.

“How *did* this become your job anyway? I thought you were destined to liberate house elves and tame werewolves, or some other bleeding savior rot like that.” He’d hoped there was an insult in there, somewhere, laced inside his tone or woven within his words. But it still sounded flat to his ear, almost polite under his occlusion.

She sighed, canceling the diagnostic runes glowing angrily around her face. She waved her hand through the air where they’d been, as if dispelling any residual magic. It struck him as an odd motion, and slightly ridiculous; it made her seem so painfully muggleborn, and she probably had no idea.

“I needed a change,” she said.

Draco had to search his brain, remind himself what he’d even asked through his occlusive fog. *Her job* .

He pulled back on his occlusion in an effort to sound more like himself, but the moment he did his eyes wandered towards her arm, almost obsessively seeking his stressor.

“Weasel too boring at home? Need a little more excitement in your life and opted for the professional?”

That sounded better. She frowned; he must be on the right track. Lost in his own head, he wondered why he’d even wanted to annoy her to begin with.

“Nice, Malfoy. Very classy. I thought you were meant to have pureblood manners. Isn’t that what your father accused me of lacking?”

“I do have manners. Excellent ones.”

“Just not with a mudblood?” she waved her forearm like a weapon, and he slammed his eyes shut as a sudden rush of hot, unwelcome discomfort melted his control. He froze it out—harder, deeper—until he couldn’t feel a thing.

He lifted his head from the arm of the sofa, no longer feeling the slightest bit relaxed. He sat, staring at her, holding her gaze as he wondered why it had to go wrong. What test he’d failed that he couldn’t fake a civil conversation, even if it was with Hermione Granger. He should be able to do it. His mother would expect those manners of him. His father probably wouldn’t care. But Draco, he didn’t know what he wanted or expected of himself.

“I’m not—” he started, failing. “I don’t—” he gave up.

His voice carried flat, syllables sour, so lifeless, and this time he wasn’t sure the Occlumency had anything to do with it. His skin crawled; he felt exposed, raw. He wanted to leap to his feet and capture his fractured attempt at speaking before it could reach her.

She dropped her arm, no longer brandishing it.

“I know,” she said, quiet, as if she understood exactly what he meant. “I did testify for you, after all.”

This was where he thanked her for that. He never had. But his jaw sealed shut, a sticking charm between his teeth, clenching them together.

The day was almost over, she could manage another hour by herself.

He stood, limbs feeling foreign, drowsy.

He left without another word.

—

He dreamed of Granger that night. And not in a pleasant, dreaming of a pretty witch and waking with the urge to fist his cock, close his eyes again, and remember whatever intimate scenario his unconscious mind had supplied him with, sort of way. But more in a way that reminded him that the closest thing to intimacy he had with Granger was an uncomfortable familiarity with the sound of her agony, screams scraping her throat and lungs to shreds.

He couldn't occlude in his dreams, which is where it all caught up to him.

Draco gave up on trying to sleep after waking from his second nightmare, flushed and burning hot, mouth pulled open in a silent scream he couldn't seem to vocalize. He sat up, swinging his legs over the side of the bed and dropping his head into his hands. He massaged his temples, ran his hands through his hair, shook his head. He hated waking like that, feeling like he'd barely escaped a trap in his own head.

Draco straightened, isolating the heat still prickling beneath his skin. He tried to ignore his dry, tight throat. He willed his magic to freeze it out and pack it up. Draco rose, careful not to occlude himself too deep. He felt some of the fear subside, some of the heat waver under his will.

Barefoot, and ignoring the searing chill from the cold stone floors, Draco let his feet carry him through his family home in the dark.

The darkness didn't scare him—many worse things had lived inside these walls than a little darkness—but it didn't soothe him, either. The prickling under his skin returned as he walked by the drawing room, unaware he'd even headed in that direction. He couldn't bring himself to stop there, not again.

He finally paused outside the parlor door, the room he'd spent the past three weeks occupying for most of his day. He cracked the door and slipped inside, settling on the sofa with inexplicable ease.

He felt like he could breathe again, like some unseen magic had thinned the suffocating weight in the air around him, leaving only the voluntary fog of his mental wards. He let them fall, incrementally, warming himself and bracing for a potential rush of panic, but none came.

This room *felt* different. Loathe as he was to even entertain the thought, he had to admit that perhaps the Ministry was onto something, effectively *scourgifying* his home of the dark magic that soiled it.

He couldn't live at Malfoy Manor anymore. Something about the manor felt sick, fetid, sour in his stomach. Spending a year in a different place had desensitized him to the creeping sensation of unease that lived inside these walls. That thought barreled through him at the same time he noticed an object sitting atop the bureau.

He stood from the sofa and approached it. He groaned, picking up the pocket watch he found there.

Granger had gotten into the bureau drawer. He'd only been partially serious, certainly not expecting her to manage it so quickly, so easily. The watch had belonged to his grandfather, Abraxas. It had been gifted to him for this thirteenth birthday and later shattered under his Aunt Bella's heel in a fit of rage over his inability to successfully cast a killing curse, even on a peacock. She'd tossed the broken pieces in the bureau drawer and flung several layers of curses on top of it, isolating him from sentiment, as she'd called it.

But the pocket watch in his hand ticked quietly, the subtle whirr of gears pulsing through the metal against his skin. He sank back onto the sofa, staring at the object in his hand.

She'd found it, and she'd fixed it, and he'd been—disagreeable, as Theo would say—an arse, was probably more accurate, seeking to insult purely out of reflex, out of the comfort of familiar contempt.

He brushed his fingers across the initials engraved in the metal, memories of his father's father: another blood zealot, another follower of lost causes. Another twist in Draco's stomach, incapable of sorting feelings of kinship from feelings of disgust.

He slipped the watch in his pocket and sat back on the sofa, leaning his head against the curved arm. He sought sleep without nightmares, without the sound of screams he knew as well as his own.

Draco did everything in his power not to look at Granger, speak to Granger, or otherwise acknowledge Granger the next day. She stepped through the Floo at nine in the morning as she always did, but instead of waiting nearby, nodding a greeting, and then sitting on the velvet sofa as *he* always did, Draco had already sat down, opened a book, and occluded out of his mind.

He held his breath in the bottom of his lungs, ice cold from Occlumency, and resisted the urge to peek over the top of his potions book. He wanted to know if she even noticed his shift in behavior; if it mattered to her. Did that make him selfish? Self-obsessed? A narcissist desperate to know if the lack of his usual greeting had registered?

A warm, orange glow illuminated the room. Draco glanced down at the floor where streaks of light told him that Granger had cast her diagnostic charms, already set to work.

He read the same chapter in his book six times before finally giving up, setting it aside and pointedly not looking in Granger's direction. Instead, he pinched the bridge of his nose, trying to stave off a headache from all his occluding and wishing he hadn't slept through breakfast that morning. He'd barely woken with time to shower, change, and be present and disinterested for Granger's arrival. He shifted his fingers to his temples, eyes closed, rubbing slow circles against his skull.

"Do you have a headache?"

His eyes popped open, drawn to her voice despite his attempts at avoidance.

"I usually have a headache." Dull voice. Dull emotions. Something dull inside his chest.

She raised her brows as if to challenge his statement.

“Do you get enough sleep?” she asked, waving a hand through her diagnostic runes as she cancelled them.

“You’re here to figure out what’s wrong with the manor, not with me.” Draco ran a hand down his face, trying to lower his Occlumency enough to unclench his stomach and relieve the pressure in his head without also having to face the fact that he might have just admitted he’s not, generally speaking, alright.

“Fixing you is definitely outside my job description. I just—I have trouble sleeping sometimes, and it often leads to a headache.”

Without his mental wards keeping him carefully contained, Draco might have shouted at her, made her hear how his lack of sleep, as of late, was directly related to that slur she kept needling him with, always on display. Sure, there were the old classics: any time he had to see The Dark Lord face to face, the astronomy tower, the blazing heat of Fiendfyre, the entirety of his seventh year. But more often than not, since Granger had shown up and forced him to relive one of the very worst moments in his life, his nightmares had a habit of returning to that drawing room.

Instead of shouting, instead of feeling any of that emotion, he let his Occlumency calm him, cool him, freeze what might have been fire in his veins.

She’d tried to be nice, he knew that. He managed a nod, giving her the acknowledgement he’d avoided earlier.

His head throbbed; his stomach churned. He didn’t want to occlude this much. But even when she attempted civility, he felt like he wanted to snap. He picked up his book, eyes and head aching as he tried to focus on the words; his seventh attempt at this same chapter.

He counted his breaths in lieu of retaining a single word in front of him. When he got to three hundred, he paused.

“Thanks for trying, Granger,” he said from behind his book, refusing to look up until after she’d stepped through the Floo at the end of the day.

A week later, Granger declared the parlor fully free of dark magic and curses. Rather than allowing her to move to another room, Lucius had a veritable museum's worth of objects delivered to them via house elves, which of course Granger couldn't stop eyeing with a pitiful mixture of sympathy and distaste.

Draco had to hold in his sniggering; the scene was so unwillingly comical, he let his Occlumency drop. He watched as Granger's eyes practically twitched at each *crack* of house elf magic dropping off more and more objects from the Malfoy family past: cursed, warded, jinxed, and hexed, a full tea service of nasty trinkets.

By the time the last elf vanished—after dropping off a truly hideous jewelry box once owned by Draco's great, great someone or another—Granger let her arms fall to her sides, eyes closed as she drew a deep breath.

Her eyes snapped open at the laugh he failed to contain. She'd been effectively encircled by all variety of potentially dangerous knick knacks.

She narrowed her eyes at him, which only amused him further.

"How I wish I could stay to witness you work your way out of this," he said.

Her eyes widened, head tilting.

"Am I finally being trusted not to defile this prestigious estate?" She crossed her arms in front of her, making no attempt to escape the ring of cursed objects.

Draco snorted indelicately, standing, "Hardly. But Astoria wasn't available for dinner this evening, so we rescheduled for lunch."

She seemed to soften, loosening the grip on her crossed arms. Without the cloud of Occlumency fogging him, Draco could really see her, look at her. It wasn't often that she fully faced him, intentionally looked at him.

The hair might have remained the same all these years later, but the rest of her hadn't.

He remembered her eyes being boring, plain, muddy as the blood his family insisted ran through her veins. But it was richer than that: a deep chocolate like his favorite type of truffles, almost offensively

expressive as they regarded him with open curiosity.

He remembered her mouth only by way of her teeth. He knew, somewhere in the recesses of his memory, that she had them fixed after an incident at school that he *might* have been responsible for. If asked to conjure an image of Granger in his mind, in present day, the buck teeth would be there. But her mouth now, just slightly parted as she watched him, looked perfectly normal—objectively attractive, even.

He remembered her face making him feel angry, annoyed, inferior, but *that* had never felt right. He'd had no reason to feel inferior to *her*.

The curiosity on her face slipped into suspicion. He'd been caught staring, but to be fair, she'd been staring, too.

"Astoria is your girlfriend?" she asked. A casual, simple question, perhaps the first personal one they'd ever shared.

He tried not to roll his eyes, or—even worse—outright laugh.

"Astoria is my intended."

She had to know what that meant, he hadn't used an obscure pureblood term, but her face wrinkled regardless.

"Intended?"

"Betrothed. Affianced. Intended by way of a marriage agreement forged between our two families." The spike of irritation shooting from his chest should have concerned him. Instead, it was almost pleasant to feel something outside of his Occlumency that didn't taste of anger or disgust.

"Oh."

"So yes, you'll be working alone for a couple of hours. As long as my father abides by the Ministry's orders and leaves you alone, he'll never know that I've been away." Despite the grandfather clock in the corner of the room, he pulled out his pocket watch, only belatedly remembering he hadn't said anything to her about it. Not a thank you, not even an acknowledgment that he'd found it. He cleared his throat.

"He doesn't know?"

“He doesn’t know, Granger,” he smirked. The expression felt easy and welcome. “So if I have your promise not to *defile* my family home, or carry out any other nefarious plans you’re storing in that hair of yours, I’m needed at Florean Fortescue’s in four minutes.”

She didn’t look offended. Merlin, she nearly looked amused. He could work with an amused Granger. If amused Granger just kept that fucking shirt sleeve down, maybe he wouldn’t have to occlude every minute of every day. Perhaps they could even try their hand at conversation or a dash of civility.

“Oh. Well, have fun,” she said, dropping her gaze to the collection of objects surrounding her.

Draco pulled a handful of Floo powder and dropped it in the fireplace, but her voice caught him before he stepped in.

“They have a new flavor, apple caramel. You should try it if you get a chance. It’s really quite good.”

He didn’t know what to do with that, what to think of it. His head tilted. So did hers.

He disappeared in a flash.

—

He met with Astoria outside Florean Fortescue’s. She looked lovely, per her usual. Every ounce the aristocratic breeding he expected. Her dark hair shined, astonishingly smooth and reflective despite its dark shade. It was honestly a laughable comparison to the nest he’d just been facing on Granger’s head. Astoria smiled when she saw him and it was nice. It was pleasant.

She was very pleasant.

He took the hand she offered, bringing it to his lips. The formality of it felt so misplaced, so out of step with the real world that he almost wanted to laugh. Should he have kissed her cheek instead? Offered her a hug? He had no idea; everything between them felt backwards, antiquated, out-of-order.

She blushed and it was pretty. This could work; it had to work. Words he repeated to himself every time he saw her. It wasn't as if he had any other choice.

And yet, as they enjoyed their ice cream—Granger was right, apple caramel was delicious—Draco had trouble recalling a single thing they'd discussed in the last hour.

"Your mother has several opinions about the floral arrangements. I worry mine might hex her soon if they can't agree on something."

Draco offered her a tight smile over a spoonful of his ice cream. The whole scene—being in Fortescue's, on a date with Astoria Greengrass, amidst the bustle of Diagon Alley—it all felt so surreal, even with the surreptitious stares aimed in his direction.

"I'm sure whatever they choose will be lovely," he said, careful with his words, with his tone, with his everything.

Astoria pulled her spoon from her mouth, delicate fingers looking like they barely had a grip on the thing. Her brows fell. Draco took that to mean she wanted him to say something else.

"But," he tried, "I'm sure if you had an opinion on it they would be willing to listen?" He hadn't meant for it to sound like a question; he'd wanted to sound sure of himself and whatever authority he got to parade around as his own.

She set her spoon in her bowl, resting in the soupy remains of the vanilla ice cream she'd ordered.

"I don't—care about the flowers."

"The—color palette, then?" In truth, Draco had tuned out almost every conversation about wedding planning he'd been subject to.

"Could we try something?" she asked instead. She pursed her lips, watching him.

"What would you like to try?"

"Would you kiss me?"

Draco didn't let his face flicker. He fought against the urge to stiffen. It wasn't that he didn't want to kiss a pretty witch. In fact, he was practically starved for such touch. But something about the idea of

kissing *this* witch. He just knew, even without having done it yet, that it wouldn't go well. That felt ominous, damning, like an inevitability he had to delay.

"Do you *want* me to kiss you?"

She ran a hand over the smooth hair at her temple, soothing flyaways that didn't exist.

"At some point, yes. I think that would make sense."

He reached for her hand, "I'd like—" he started, finding himself dangerously close to honesty. "I'd like to try and make it special—if I can."

That seemed to be an acceptable answer. Her eyes softened. And for the rest of their date, they engaged in conversation he might have called interesting. Interesting, that is, if he hadn't spent the entire morning watching Granger resist the urge to forcibly liberate his family elves.

It was only as he stepped back through the Floo that Draco realized what he'd done. He'd bid Astoria farewell, a perfunctory kiss to her cheek before he doubled back to Fortescue's, tapping his fingers against the pocket watch in his trousers.

Granger had lined all the artifacts and antiques along the far wall of the parlor in cascading size order. An honestly impressive amount of organization considering Draco hadn't even been gone for two full hours. She didn't glance back at him as he stepped through the Floo; she just kept staring at the glowing red rune in front of her face.

Draco took a step towards her. The click of his shoes on the stone floor must have caught her attention because she jolted, just enough to give away her surprise.

He held out the takeaway apple caramel ice cream he'd brought her.

"You fixed my grandfather's pocket watch."

She blinked, then cautiously reached to take the bowl, chilled by a

stasis charm to prevent melting.

“And so you’ve”—she glanced down at the bowl of ice cream in her hands—“brought me the ice cream I said I liked?”

Well, it sounded downright idiotic when she said it like that. He glanced at her left arm, thankfully covered by a sleeve today. He had to stop looking for it, as if he expected to have any other reaction than abject horror at the sight of it.

Instead, with his molars practically ground to dust in the back of his mouth, he nodded, mouth flat and tight.

She cancelled her diagnostic spell and walked to the sofa—his sofa—that he sat on literally every single day while he pretended Hermione Granger needed supervision. As if her compulsive tendencies towards righteousness would allow her to do anything unsavory to the estate.

Draco stood in the middle of the room, hands in his pockets, before he opted to sit in the armchair opposite her.

Granger took a bite of the ice cream and made a happy sound Draco knew he probably shouldn’t find so interesting. Then she started to laugh.

“It’s better than I remembered,” she said through a giggle. Draco didn’t see how that was funny.

“You’re probably hungry. You never stop to eat.”

She swallowed a laugh, frown taking over her face for a moment. She tapped her spoon against the edge of her bowl.

“So is this—some kind of Slytherin quid pro quo ice cream, or something?”

“Excuse me?”

“Fixing the watch. You’re—paying me in ice cream?”

Draco had had the distinct displeasure of watching Granger’s brain at work for years in school. Her thoughts tended to volley in an almost physical display on her face as her brain jumped through whatever series of Quidditch hoops were required to come to a point.

She looked downright debilitated by the force of her thinking as she watched him, ice cream in hand.

“If you want to call it that,” Draco said. “Just about anything is a quid pro quo situation.”

Hermione laughed through what sounded distressingly like a hiccup, or a snort, or something equally inelegant.

“You can’t quid pro quo acts of kindness, Malfoy.”

A challenge, then? Draco smirked.

“Of course I can.”

Granger rolled her eyes and tucked her feet beneath her as she settled in to finish her ice cream.

“I should probably eat lunches.”

Draco raised a brow at her, belatedly realizing he’d barely had to use his Occlumency all day.

Chapter End Notes

i want to thank everyone so very much for all the lovely and kind comments being left on this story! unfortunately, i haven't had the time to respond to them all, but please know that i read each and every one and, especially when im having a hard day, they bring me so much joy! so thank you all so very, very much! <3 i really hope you enjoyed this chapter! see y'all monday!

Chapter 4: -2.833, -2.916, -3.000

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

April

tick

Annoying Granger was fun. Well, fun insofar as it provided an outlet for Draco's frustrations that wasn't outright nasty. It let him lower his Occlumency. It let him practice having relatively civil conversations during the endless hours they spent together, day after day, week after week, month after month.

She arrived in a flash of green, nine in the morning exactly, always perfectly on time. He nodded a greeting. She wore a cardigan, sleeves down. He didn't occlude.

"Granger."

"Malfoy."

"I was wondering if I could request you work on a specific room today."

Granger paused mid-incantation, diagnostic runes delayed by his request. She froze, looking at him with obvious confusion.

"But—I'm almost done with everything your father had sent here. I'd like to be systematic and complete this room before I begin—"

"Granger," he said, taking a small step forward. He halted; he had no idea why he'd done that. It wasn't as if he could walk right up to her and shake her from her chattering. "I know. We'll go room by room for everything else. I just—I have a small office I'd like to ensure is fully decommissioned."

Granger looked at her wand, still poised to begin her diagnostics in the parlor. She let her wand arm fall.

"Why?" She wore that expression she often did, the one where she

looked like she couldn't quite figure him out, like she didn't trust him not to be a complete arse.

"I'm hoping to put it to use soon."

Her mouth quirked, then paused mid-action, like she couldn't commit to the smile.

"Finally decided to get a job, Malfoy?"

"Might have had one a while ago if many places were interested in hiring ex-Death Eaters," he said. He could feel the hard edge in his tone, the distaste. "Tell me, is your Ministry doing any hiring of highly educated—"

"There are anti-discrimination measures in place to prevent—"

He laughed, dragging a hand through his hair. He shifted his weight, looking around the room as if the very space might provide agreement that Granger was *really* being that naive.

"Yeah. Right," he said. "Tried that. I'm far more qualified than a fair number of the people I've seen join their payroll."

Hermione crossed her arms, frowning.

"And what makes you think you're more qualified?"

His brows shot up. *Oh*. This would be fun. She didn't know.

"How many masteries do *you* have, Granger?"

Her mouth dropped open, just a bit. But he saw the surprise there.

"Well, I started with the Ministry right after my NEWTs—"

"So none, then."

She scowled at him and he loved it, chuckling as a tiny thrill shot through his chest. Annoying Granger was *really* fun.

"How many do you have?" She shifted, arm pulled tighter across her chest. He could see her fighting against the frown on her face and it was fucking adorable—which was not a thought he allowed himself to have about Granger lightly. But gods, to get to tell her he was more educated than her, he ought to mark the date on his calendar, celebrate it every year.

“Just one.”

“In what? And how? When?”

Draco laughed again, and it could have been mean, it could have been cruel, if he'd decided to laugh *at* her. But instead, he just laughed, enjoying the moment for himself. Her shoulders dropped, arms unfolding.

He motioned for her to follow, opening the parlor door for her, literally the first time they'd left the parlor in the three months she'd been working in his home. He turned when he realized she hadn't followed. She had her bottom lip trapped between her teeth, expression somewhere between concern and annoyance: over what, Draco could only guess.

So he did.

“We won't go anywhere near—that room.”

She'd been staring down the corridor, gaze snapping to him when he spoke. She released her lip. The concern on her face vanished, replaced with determination: jaw set, brows level. She marched to meet him and kept pace as they walked to his wing in the manor.

“Potions,” he said to fill the silence. “I started prepping for a mastery while I studied to sit for my NEWTs.”

Her step faltered, a pause of surprise, before she corrected herself.

“You studied for your NEWTs *and* a potions mastery at the same time?”

Draco couldn't bring himself to look at her. He knew if he saw her eyes wide with disbelief or amazement he'd be forced to gloat, or be nasty about how she doubted him. Was she not aware that he'd been second to her in nearly every subject, and regularly bested her in potions?

“I wasn't allowed to leave these grounds, Granger. I had time. I was under house arrest for two years. Studied the whole time.” He shrugged, turning them down a hallway to where he'd set up a small office he might start a mail order potions business out of. “Last year I apprenticed. I only got back from Sarajevo in January.”

“Oh.” It was a quiet acknowledgement. They stopped at the door to

the office. “I hear Sarajevo is quite pretty.”

“It is.” He opened the door and held out an arm, ushering her inside. He was pleased when she didn’t hesitate. “I’m surprised you didn’t get a mastery, to be honest.”

It occurred to him as Granger cast her diagnostic spell and he settled in a large armchair in the corner of the room that they were presently engaged in normal, civil conversation. And they had been for several minutes. He’d annoyed her and it was fun, but they’d also just talked.

He watched her study the orange and yellow symbols. He was pleased to see no red in the office. He was fairly certain nothing nefarious had happened in this room recently, or that any of the furniture had a proclivity towards biting people, but he could hardly account for whole century’s worth of history.

“I think I’d like a mastery,” she said, poking at one of the orange symbols with her wand. She dragged it to the desk where she let it settle into the wood. “But I started working right after my NEWTs. I do enjoy Arithmancy and Ancient Runes; it’s nice getting to use them in this job. But now that I’m working I don’t know if I could just stop to get a mastery—”

Draco scoffed.

Whatever comfort they’d managed to nurture cracked when Granger’s posture went rigid.

“You think that’s funny?” she asked. “Some of us don’t get to work for *fun* . We can’t all have mountains of galleons—”

“That’s not what I meant, Granger,” he said. Even through his efforts at civility, the words came out tight in response to her sudden frustration. “The only funny thing here is that you seem to think you couldn’t do both at once.”

She dropped her spell, wand hand coming to rest at her side as she turned to look at him.

Draco sank further into his chair. He leaned against his arm and tried to look and feel as casual and disinterested as possible. He was fairly certain he’d just complimented her. Accidentally and adjacently. But, still: something of a compliment.

She had a bit of pink spreading across her cheeks and she looked

nearly as uncomfortable about his slip up as he felt.

Surprisingly, she snorted a soft laugh.

“Thanks for trying, Malfoy.”

Annoying Granger was fun: forgetting that they weren’t friends and didn’t get to have normal conversations with accidental compliments, wasn’t.

—

If not for the fact that Draco had only been released from his own house arrest a little over a year ago, and for the fact that he’d never been able to successfully cast a killing curse, he would absolutely consider murder in this moment.

He leaned against the wall near the door to his father’s study, arms crossed as he watched his father’s parole representative from the Ministry review his case in preparation for the anniversary of his arrest. Every May, Lucius engaged in his annual right to dispute the terms of his sentencing. Every year, it seemed the Ministry paid less and less attention to the Malfoy name.

Narcissa observed from her seat in a nearby chair, hands in her lap. She wore a mask of perfect nonchalance, just barely betrayed by the pink and white flushes in her fingers as she wrung her hands together, watching in silence.

Lucius, who Draco knew very well *had* successfully cast a killing curse in his life, looked near enough to doing it again.

“You’re wasting Ministry resources, Mr. Malfoy. Your sentencing will not change.”

“And yet, it is my right to dispute it,” Lucius said. “I have no intention of being housebound for another five years.”

The Ministry representative, who’d arrived in the middle of breakfast and thusly derailed everyone’s morning, looked like he could have done with a spot of tea and toast himself. Pale and unpleasant looking, beads of sweat gathering along his hairline, he’d probably overheated

from the synthetic fabrics in his robes—hardly breathable—that were offensively atrocious to look at.

Draco stepped beside his mother's chair. If looks could kill, she'd be the murderer this morning, boring holes into the parole officer's skull. Draco let his hand rest on the top of the chair, almost like placing it on her shoulder, or holding her hand. It was an approximation of comfort, the closest they could come.

It wasn't that he didn't want to offer her support, nor was it that he couldn't. But proximity brought memories, vivid ones that had yet to dull, burning like bright light behind his eyelids, branded and dancing across his vision with every blink. He'd tried to avoid political or philosophical conversations with his parents during his two years under house arrest, both spent with his mother, just one spent with his father after he served a year in Azkaban. But they couldn't always be avoided.

He had no desire to discuss the war with his parents because he couldn't bear to know whether or not they'd evolved, changed their way of thinking. He would have rather lived with not knowing, than risk confirmation that they still believed in the kind of blood purity that had nearly broken them.

And that's how his mother had phrased it, one evening during an especially uncomfortable dinner on the anniversary of the Battle of Hogwarts. Lucius and Draco had been engaged in an unofficial competition to see who could be the drunkest at the dinner table. Draco was fairly certain he'd won, which was how he failed to corral the conversation away from forbidden topics.

It was how he failed to hold his tongue, questions he'd shoved down, regurgitated in an inelegant, brutish way.

"You still think they're dirty?" he'd half asked, half accused, his father. "Think we should kill all the mudbloods?"

His mother answered instead, leaving Lucius to grow reddened under his anger, more volatile with drink.

"The—extreme methods of The Dark Lord were never the point, Draco, you know that. But he was—willing to support our beliefs when others weren't." She reached out to him from across the table, resting her hand atop his. His mother's touch had always been a source of comfort, shelter against a storm, but as she continued speaking, her touch grew unfamiliar, foreign.

“Our values have not changed,” she said. “We are proud of who we are. We, and many other respected families, have been brought low by the thinking of the new administration, but we have not been broken. You should be proud we persist, not ashamed that we’ve temporarily lost.”

Temporarily lost .

Disgust churned with bile in Draco’s stomach. He felt like he might vomit, and not as a result of the liquor he’d consumed. He pulled his hand from hers and risked a glance at his father, who looked furious and drunk and like a shadow of the man around whom Draco’s entire sense of self once revolved.

How could they not see it? The Dark Lord had been a half blood himself. Hermione Granger was the brightest witch of her age and her blood ought to flow like sludge, muddy and vile. Yet he’d seen it, red as her Gryffindor bravery. Even the Malfoy family tree—if traced far enough back, before the Statutes for Secrecy—included several muggle unions. How could they not see it? How imaginary it all was, how made up? And it had made him. Unmade him, too. He wasn’t brought low; he was broken. His mother was very, very wrong.

The Ministry representative pulled several stacks’ worth of parchment from his briefcase and dropped them on Lucius’s desk, toppling an inkwell and two exorbitantly expensive eagle owl quills in the process.

“Your case,” the man said.

Draco dropped his hand from the chair, curling it into a fist and anchoring himself in the pain of his nails biting into his palms. He might disagree with his family about many—most—things, but this level of disrespect stank of corruption and unprofessionalism. Draco briefly wondered how much money it might take to make him change his mind.

“I’m telling you now, Malfoy, stop wasting our time. Your case isn’t even reviewed—straight in the bin every year. No one wants filth like you back out in the public.”

Draco’s jaw ached from clenching it shut, teeth groaning under the strain. The crooked fucking Ministry was all about equality until it came to the families they disliked. Theo had similar problems with his parole officer, and he hadn’t even *been* a Death Eater. Still they’d kept him in Azkaban for a month and under house arrest for a year. His

name alone had been enough to damn him.

Lucius stood, nearly a full foot taller than the man across from him. An intimidating tower was most of what little Lucius had left to lob.

“If I had my wand,” Lucius began. Draco could see his hand tightening around the head of his cane.

The Ministry representative laughed, taking a step back, seemingly unconcerned with the palpable sense of fury emanating from Lucius.

“If I had my way, you’d never get it back. Keep you all as close to squibs as possible.” He closed his briefcase and looked back at Lucius, laughing something nasty again.

Draco wondered if his father had ever thrown a punch. Now seemed like an excellent opportunity to try.

“I don’t want to see a dispute of sentencing filed next month, Mr. Malfoy. If I do, I’m burning it on sight.”

The man turned and let himself out, clearly ignorant to social practices of being escorted from a visiting home. Draco only unclenched his fist when the sound of footsteps faded enough that he could no longer count them, imagining them as blows landed at the same pace.

His mother let out a small, low breath beside him.

“Less and less respectful every year. Growing bolder, too,” she said.

“Is this normal?” Draco asked. He’d avoided these meetings in the past purely by making himself scarce, but the breakfast interruption had volunteered him for the family duty of enduring his father’s circumstances.

Lucius sneered and sat back in his seat. Narcissa angled her head to look at Draco.

“You needn’t worry about it, dear,” she said. “The Ministry is run by brutes these days.”

“Imbeciles,” Lucius added.

“Shouldn’t you—file a complaint, or something? He’d just said he won’t take your case seriously.”

The silence that followed his question was worse than disbelieving laughter, worse than a reprimand. His parents watched him, pointed stares that said, *surely no son of ours is that naive*. And it was like hearing Granger insist he could get a job with the right qualifications.

The silence broke when Lucius shifted the pile of parchment from his desk to the wastebasket. Draco pulled out his pocket watch and cursed, ignoring the protest about his language from his mother.

Half past nine in the morning. Granger would have been here for nearly half an hour and he'd been so distracted he hadn't even realized it.

He excused himself, leaving his parents, and the distaste that was their legal circumstances, behind.

—

Draco didn't find Hermione in the parlor, but the open door told him she'd been there. He'd left it closed the day before and neither his parents nor the elves had any reason to enter. His parents hadn't even visited this wing since the decommissioning process began. Rather, his father had taken an approach of pretending it simply wasn't happening during the day and then requesting exceedingly detailed progress reports in his office after dinner. Progress reports that were exceptionally boring for Draco because they did not change from day to day; she found dark magic on an object, she removed it. Or, she found a cursed object, it tried to bite her, or sting her, or burn her, and she fixed it.

There was almost no deviation to speak of outside of the one day he'd ask her to work in his own office. Which had been more of the same, but in a different room in a different wing. And now today. Draco reeled at the wild and surreal image of Granger wandering the manor by herself.

Why ? Why wouldn't she just stay and work? There were still several objects needing her attention in the parlor; she had no reason to wander, and even less of a reason to try and find him. Draco's presence was unnecessary, a formality imposed by his father that meant nothing to her actual work.

Draco dragged a hand through his hair and winced. Already dishevelled and the day had barely begun. He turned away from the parlor, looking down the hall. He was at a loss. He supposed she could have left, but that didn't seem like Granger at all. Why would she leave her work?

Then again, why would she wander his home instead of *doing* her work?

With a disgruntled growl in the back of his throat, Draco decided he'd just *look* for her.

"Topsy," he called.

Crack .

"Master Draco has need of Topsy?"

"You haven't seen Miss Granger this morning, have you, Topsy?"

They elf smiled, bouncing as she clapped her hands together.

"Oh yes, Master Malfoy, sir. Miss Granger is so kind to Topsy when I bring more trinkets for her to play with."

"This morning? You brought her more work this morning?"

Draco knelt to speak easier with the elf, craning to converse with a barely two foot tall magical creature made conversation in any sort of extended manner extremely uncomfortable.

"Yes, Master Draco. Miss Granger asked for directions to the west hall drawing room so Topsy showed her."

Draco staggered, tilting from his already unsteady crouch on the balls of his feet. He had to brace himself with a hand against the cold stone floors, a hot, vibrating kind of panic erupted in his chest, shooting to his extremities.

Topsy, sweet Topsy, noticed his reaction.

"Topsy told Miss Granger the room is locked and she would not be able to visit, but she insisted. Did Topsy do wrong? Should Topsy punish—"

"No, Topsy. No punishment—just, go. You are dismissed."

Crack .

Draco sank to his knees, head bowed. He must have looked absurd, forehead practically against the floor as he focused on his breathing, as he forced ice into his brain, his veins. Why the fuck? *Why the fuck* would she go there?

Draco struggled to swallow, throat tight. He squeezed his eyes shut and tried to focus on the freezing Occlumency, isolating and flaking away every unwelcome shard in his mind: panic, fear, guilt, confusion, regret, hate, guilt, guilt, *guilt* . He tried swallowing again, forcing the motion through the painful lump obstructing his breathing, seizing and strangling his vocal cords. Cold enough, frozen enough, he found numbness.

He stood, spello-taped together by freezing magic, and walked, purposely, quickly, agonizingly— *isolate, flake* —to the drawing room.

He nearly doubled over again when he saw it, saw the sheer audacity of it. Granger was insane; it was the only excuse.

One of the doors to the drawing room lay on the floor, ripped from its hinges. The other had been shattered and splintered, still closed but buckled from the force of whatever absolutely astonishing magic had been used to break through it.

She'd just—had she really? Draco swallowed against the tightness at the back of his throat. His lungs felt like they'd shriveled and died in his chest, decayed, desiccated things trying to perform the duties of something living.

He'd stopped walking far enough away that he couldn't see inside the room yet. He didn't want to. Not even a little bit. But if this was his reaction to it, what could hers possibly be? He dragged another hand through his hair, this time completely disinterested in how wild or unmanaged it made him look. He hardly cared about that, not anymore. He couldn't just *leave* her in there, not again.

He took several cautious steps, sinking deeper into his Occlumency with each one: frozen and freezing and functionally blank. He gripped the door frame with his left hand. He flinched; he could see the faint shadow of the brand on his forearm through the sleeve of his white shirt. He took a single additional step forward, bringing the interior of the drawing room into full view.

His Occlumency collapsed. It brought him to his knees in the space of

a breath, lungs seizing, ice-flooded-veins surging into motion, scalding hot as molten rock, shards of self reassembling into the jagged mess that lived inside his head.

He almost vomited up his breakfast, stomach churning and turning and roiling in the sudden heat that brought it to a boil. He'd only ever lost control of his Occlumency one other time in his life, and it had been in that room, not an hour after Granger had been tortured in it, and his family tortured in turn for her escape.

Draco heaved, hating himself. How fucking pathetic, reduced to a withering mess at the threshold to a room in his own home. He squeezed his eyes shut, screwed up his face, and forced a facsimile of normal breathing: in and out, push and pull. He latched onto the sound of a nearby clock, tick tick ticking a rhythm he could follow, that he could cling to in order to time his breaths.

Reluctantly, fingers still clinging to the door frame, Draco forced himself to stand. His knuckles had turned white as he gripped it, clutching for support, for grounding.

He willed himself to look again.

Granger stood in the middle of the room, just next to the shattered carcass of the chandelier that once hung from the ceiling. She stared at the floor. Draco couldn't help himself—it happened entirely within his subconscious, seeking out her left arm. She had her sleeves shoved up: showing it off. Showing it off in this place.

His stomach turned again. She had her right hand just barely grazing the letters in her skin. He could see her fingertips drumming lightly, skating up and down her arm as she stared at the carpets beneath her, at the blood that wasn't exclusively hers. Many people had bled on those carpets that day, but hers was among it, and utterly indistinguishable from the rest.

Why was she just standing there, staring at the floor? Draco decided he should stop her, escort her elsewhere. Save her? No. With a surge of shame through his chest, Draco knew she didn't need any saving, not by anyone, and certainly not by him. Not now, anyway. That opportunity had long since passed.

But still, he should stop this. This couldn't be good, for either of them.

He tried to cross the threshold into the drawing room—really, he did. But his legs would not move, no matter how much effort he put into

engaging the muscles in his thigh, his calves, bending his knees, lifting his feet. It was like a total body bind had gripped him, robbing him of control over his limbs.

He couldn't go in.

No, he wouldn't go in.

No, he'd been right the first time. He *couldn't* go in.

He almost wanted to stomp his foot from the frustration, from the guilt, from the utterly incomprehensible sight of watching Hermione Granger stand in the spot where she'd been tortured with barely more than a curious look on her face.

He watched her shoulders rise and fall: a deep breath. She let go of her left arm, lifting her hand to her face and dragging a finger under her eye. If she'd been crying, it hadn't been much. She stood barely ten feet from him; he would have been able to see it.

Her shoulders lifted and fell again: another breath. And then she looked up, straight at him. She walked towards him, then past him, into the hallway and away from the drawing room as if he hadn't been there at all, or as if she hadn't cared.

It took him too long, several moments of confusion and grief, still staring at the carpets where she'd been standing, before the body bind that had seized his nervous system released him and allowed him to move his legs. He stepped away from the drawing room and everything that happened there.

He walked quickly, the click of his shoes on stone floors not unlike the ticking of the clock he'd used to measure his breaths. He increased his pace, eyes focused on the riot of brown curls he sought to reach.

His voice died in his throat, a crackle of intention eviscerated by vocal cords shredded in grief. He tried again.

"Granger," he said from several feet behind her.

She kept walking: confident, quick. Then she made a wrong turn, headed towards his father's wing, not the parlor.

"Granger, stop," he tried again, voice stronger that time, more solid, devoid of the soundless gaps that let breath blow right through his vocal cords.

She stopped but she did not turn around. He stopped, too, still several feet away.

“The parlor is the other way.”

She took another breath. Watching her shoulders rise and fall had a sort of calming effect on Draco, a physical reminder of the thing she did, the thing he sometimes struggled to do.

She turned suddenly, hair moving in a delay around her, whipping with the force of her momentum. She began walking again, towards him, past him. Again and again.

He reached out this time, catching her by the arm, fingers wrapping around her upper arm, sinking into her soft cardigan. They both froze, side by side, facing different directions. He didn't look directly at her, but at a particularly independent curl trying to break free from the rest at the back of her head. He would have bet a substantial number of galleons that she didn't look directly at him either.

He kept holding her arm, somehow incapable of letting go, not now that he'd found an anchor, stilling the churning sea in his stomach. She didn't try to break away either.

“What was that, Granger?” he asked the wild curl under his focus. A ray of sunlight peeked through a nearby window, hinting at a few golden strands hidden in a deep brown landscape.

This time, he could feel her breath in the way her arm lifted, just a touch, as she invited air into her lungs. It felt like breathing on his own, too.

“I wasn't letting her win.”

A flush of heat dropped in his chest, a *bombarda* against his ribs—weaponized guilt—and somehow, he knew she hadn't meant it that way. At least, he hoped she didn't. Not that he wouldn't deserve it if she did.

Because *he'd* certainly let her win. *Her* being Bellatrix, the winning being everything else: the game they'd been pawns in, the battle in which they'd been but cannon fodder. He let her arm go, feeling vile for having had the audacity to touch her in the first place.

She didn't move when he released her. In his peripheral vision, he saw her head turn, looking more directly at him. He couldn't bring himself

to do the same.

“Let’s get back to work,” she said, as if he had any real part in it.

But it helped to freeze out the molten mush inside his head, reminding him of his normal. His Occlumency was weak, magic cautious and hesitant after such blatant abuse, but it was enough to cool the fire that nearly melted his marrow.

He nodded, a single lift and dip of his jaw, curt and short and all he could manage.

He could see her nodding, too, perhaps in agreement that *yes, this was a miserable way to start one’s day*. But she started walking a moment later. He followed, several paces behind, utterly floored by whatever it was he’d just been witness to.

He watched her work the rest of the day, not even pretending to read or occupy himself in another way. He just watched as she summoned diagnostic spells, manipulated them around objects steeped in dark magic, in a home steeped in dark magic, sorting through curses and counter curses as if her mind held an entire curse breaking guidebook open in front of her eyes. Which it probably did, knowing what he knew of Granger’s fondness—dare he call it obsession—with books.

As he watched he realized how absolutely miraculous it was that she could even bring herself to step onto this property to begin with. If Draco had the choice he never would have come back, and already he planned to leave it again, find a flat of his own. But she’d come back and faced the people who’d hurt her here: in physical form as Lucius Malfoy, or in echo as Bellatrix Lestrangle.

And then she managed complex magic on top of it? Day in and day out, ridding his home of the type of magic they all probably deserved to drown in.

It felt good, honestly, to finally admit it. Not to hide behind the jealousy or the shame, but to simply acknowledge her for what she was without any comparison to himself.

Hermione Granger was fucking impressive. And he’d finally let himself admit it.

He didn't even try sleeping that night. Draco knew it would have been a laughable failure and he didn't much fancy the idea of seeing his dear Aunt Bella again, even within the confines of his own mind. Instead, he paced, fixating on what he'd watched Granger do that morning, standing and staring at the place she'd experienced so much pain.

He couldn't make sense of it. Couldn't wrap his head around how that would help, could help, staring it down in such a way.

He gave up pacing shortly after midnight. He hadn't even changed out of his day clothes, echoes of his footfalls providing a comfortable clicking to manage his breathing. He threw open the doors to his room and headed straight for his makeshift potions lab.

He was obsessed; he knew he was. He'd known it for a while. He couldn't stop seeking out that scar. It was a destructive obsession, masochistic, seeking another hit of pain and guilt every time he laid eyes on it. And somehow it didn't seem to affect her at all. Granger didn't glamor it, didn't keep her sleeves down like he did with his; she just lived her life despite it. And then she'd stood in the spot where it happened like it was the easiest thing in the world: staring one's demons in the eyes.

Draco *evanesco'd* several cauldrons and summoned a smattering of various potions ingredients. He didn't understand why it didn't bother her, why she didn't seem to want to hide or remove it. But he had to give her the choice. He wanted—no, needed—her to have the choice. And not just so he didn't have to see it, but because she'd earned it. She'd accepted it—something horrible and hateful—and she deserved to be free of it.

Chapter End Notes

effusive and ongoing thanks to the absolutely outstanding [icepower55](#), [Endless_musings](#), and [persephone_stone](#) for all their hard work on this story! i hope you've enjoyed this chapter, thank you so much for reading!

Chapter 5: -2.750, -2.833, -2.916

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

May

tock

Things regressed. Or, more accurately, Draco regressed. Whatever inferred civility he'd forged with Granger evaporated with the fumes in this potions laboratory, seared from the surface of his skin as he toiled to create a potion to rid her of that fucking scar.

It made him angry. Angry he had to see it. Angry she had to live with it. Just, generally, angry. And even with a renewed reliance on his Occlumency, Draco struggled to keep that irritation at bay, constantly bombarded by annoyance. Granger wasn't an idiot; he could freely admit that these days. She noticed the flip in his mood immediately, frown settling on her face before she shook her head and began her work, ignoring him.

Which was *fine* ; he'd prefer to ignore her, too.

Except that he couldn't. She occupied most of the space inside his brain, most of his thoughts revolving around the healing potions he kept experimenting with and the fact that he had to sit in the same room as her for most of the day.

It made for a very uncomfortable few weeks wherein they rarely spoke, rarely even looked at each other, while he watched their tacit agreement at civility rotting in the silences between them.

She sighed, a heavy sound spreading through the room and staking ownership of all the air. Draco tried not to breathe, not to think. He'd rather not acknowledge it at all.

"I'm done."

Draco's hands flexed around his book, thumbs nearly ripping the pages. He forced his fingers to relax.

“Done?”

He didn't know how to talk to her anymore. Ice in his veins, ice in his words. Cold and flat and emotionless.

“With this room, and everything that's been delivered here. So, unless there are more trinkets your father plans to have dropped off, it's time to move on.”

“Move on?”

Her head tilted; he hadn't even realized he was looking at her. Perhaps because he looked more through her, focusing on his mental shields.

She made a frustrated sound, hands on her hips.

“Yes, Malfoy. Move on, I have to do every single room in this place. I know you know that.”

“Right.”

She made another noise, somewhere between a scoff and a growl.

“Merlin, Malfoy. You're the worst like this. Show me to the library. I want to start there if this is what I have to put up with.”

He could have teased her then. Reminded her of the obsessive fastidiousness with which she'd once planned to tackle his estate, room by room, starting in this parlor and working her way through. Skipping to the library would be skipping several hallways, nearly a full wing, and would be a significant deviation from her plan. In a dim part of his brain he knew being reminded of that fact would needle her, but in a fun way, in an *annoying Granger is fun* way.

But instead: “Of course.”

He stood, closing his book and carrying it with him.

Halfway down the hallway, she tried talking again.

“I've been curious about the library here, if I'm honest.”

The hairs on the back of Draco's neck lifted. He hadn't realized she walked so close behind him. He could practically feel her words brushing up against him, grazing his neck and back. They felt like knives, stabbing him in the back.

He didn't respond.

"I can only imagine what kinds of books have been hoarded over the centuries in these old estates. I'm sure a few things will be quite nasty, but it could be fun, too."

"Nothing about this place is fun, Granger."

He heard her footsteps stop behind him. He paused, too, waiting.

"That seems a bit extreme," came her voice from behind him. "I don't believe anything in this world is all bad. There must be something good here. And I suspect it will be in the library."

She started walking again, matching where he'd stopped, then overtaking him. And as she passed, she added, "It usually is."

She must have thought she'd been right when they entered the library. He saw it on her face: all wonder and curiosity, like she'd somehow managed to forget the terrible things that happened a few halls over.

He watched as she restrained herself, pulling back against the impulse to immediately investigate the rows and rows of shelves. But she was smart, always so smart. She cast a diagnostic charm instead; angry bright red light flooded the space.

She sighed, but still somehow managing to look wistful. Something about her wonder melted his Occlumency, just a bit. Then he let it happen a little more, with intention, trying to hold back the rush of agitation that had taken up residence in his chest. He focused on the look on her face: the amazement, the curiosity, the awe. It helped.

She frowned at the glowing red runes in front of her.

"This—is going to take a while."

"There's a whole shelf in the back that makes the Restricted Section look like children's books."

She whipped around to look at him, all that curiosity now aimed in his direction. He tried not to wince under her appraisal. His tone must have changed—of course it had—when he eased up the occlusion. She pulled her bottom lip between her teeth, still staring at him.

She rotated her floating runes between them, wand pointed directly at a red one. She hesitated in her movement, a thoughtful tilt to her head

as her eyes danced between him and the rune. He saw the decision when she made it, resolve in the way her jaw tensed. She waved the red rune towards him, taking a step closer.

If Draco's brain hadn't completely stalled he might have pulled his Occlumency back into place. Or drawn his wand. Or flinched. But he barely had time to consider his options before she stood in front of him, wand pointed at his chest, directing the rune to him. It sank through his shirt and into his skin, like he might be an artifact in need of decommissioning. He shoved a hand into his pocket, trying to hide the sudden shaking.

The rune disappeared into his chest. Red light vanished before it flared again, tracing the jagged lines crossing his torso, glowing through his shirt, scars *he'd* had the decency to hide. He kept his left arm glued to his side. He didn't want to know if his mark glowed, too.

She made a thoughtful noise and rotated, just enough to pull another red rune from her floating charm. She directed it at herself and Draco watched it sink into her skin. A moment later, red light glowed from the letters beneath her shirt sleeve.

"Cursed scars are kind of troublesome, aren't they?" she asked. She looked at him like she'd just figured him out. And that couldn't be further from the truth. Brilliant as she might be, she had no idea.

He thought she might say something. But she turned abruptly, taking her floating runes with her. She sent them flying at the nearest shelf, identifying pockets of dark magic.

Draco placed a hand to his chest, expecting the lines across them to burn, as angry as the red light that glowed through them. But he felt perfectly normal, if perhaps a little cold from the residual Occlumency. The light faded and its absence felt normal—too normal.

He looked around, wishing he had his usual sofa for comfort, but opted for a desk chair instead. Setting his book down, he tried to lose himself in potions theory, in ideas about dark magic and cursed scars so painfully relevant to that moment that he almost wanted to laugh.

But he worried if he did it might sound too much like a scream.

Watching Granger with books was fucking endearing. And Draco allowed himself to think that only after a week of watching her eyes light up every time she cleared a row of dark magic and then allowed herself a few minutes of pure wonder, fingers trailing spines and memorizing titles.

He'd caught her, more than once, sneaking glances at him as if she expected him to remind her she was meant to be working, or perhaps to give her permission to stop and read. In a near lifetime spent being annoyed by Granger's swottiness, watching her try to resist the pull of books was frustratingly delightful.

He looked up from his reading when she released a squeal. She had her hands clasped over her mouth, eyes wide and brows raised when her gaze met his. Draco arched a brow, curious. He'd actually managed most of the afternoon without his Occlumency, which made room for the more subtle emotions so easily steamrolled by magic. Things like curiosity, fascination, *endearment* .

She cleared her throat, letting her hands fall.

"Sorry, sorry," she said. Her eyes darted to the shelf next to her and back to him again. She'd flushed pink, color blooming up her neck and across her cheeks.

Draco affected his most imperious tone, brow still arched, "Would you care to share with the class, Miss Granger?"

He did not expect her to make a small whimpering noise, a strangled high-pitched sound that emanated from the back of her throat. She nearly jumped, turning back to the row of books, obscuring his view of her redoubled blush with a quagmire of hair.

A moment later, she moved again, pulling a book from the shelf. She stepped down off the stool she'd been using and approached the table where he sat. Her cheeks were still flushed with pink.

"This is a first edition *Numerology and Grammatica* ; it predates several major celestial events. The Hogwarts Library doesn't even have one of these—it has an antiquated method of moon phase cross-referencing that's fallen out of favor but is actually quite interesting—"

She cut herself off abruptly when Draco chuckled.

“First editions get you going, Granger?” he stood, ignoring her tiny groan of protest. “Wait here.”

Draco disappeared between the shelves, towards one of the sealed sections kept behind glass. She hadn't ventured far enough into the stacks to find it yet. When she did, she might melt into the floor. He cast an unlocking charm on the glass and pulled it open, knowing exactly which extremely old, extremely expensive tome he intended to impress her with.

He hadn't read this particular book since sixth year, something he'd forgotten until that very moment, holding it in his hands. He'd hoped it might give him answers; instead it had given him something which he simultaneously regretted and appreciated learning, if for no other fact than that it probably kept him alive.

He set the book on the table in front of her.

He wanted to bottle her gasp, preserve the sound of it for safekeeping so that he could revisit it when he wanted to know what genuine, unbridled excitement sounded like. He'd never heard something so pure in his entire life.

“This—” her voice actually faltered, completely failed to form words as she ran her hands along the front cover. She looked up at him as he sat across from her again. “Is this really a first edition of *Hogwarts: A History* ?”

“It is.”

She marveled, hands shaking as she opened the book and gasped again.

“It's—annotated?”

“By the original editor. This is her copy.”

She whimpered again, eyes round as the gods damned moon as she stared down at it.

“I've never seen a first edition before—I wonder what differences there are.” She flipped through the pages, fingers lightly tracing the text, illustrations, and annotations.

“It includes the come-and-go room, and it has more extensive explanations about the anti-apparation wards. Those are the only

differences I noticed.”

He probably should have stopped watching as she had a near-transcendent experience with the book, but he couldn't tear his eyes away. He couldn't remember the last time he'd witnessed someone enjoy something as much as Granger enjoyed that book, mere feet from him.

It was infectious: an infection he'd welcome. He could be overcome by it, altered by it, die by it, and probably still be pleased to do so if it meant experiencing whatever this was.

Her head snapped up, regarding him with open surprise.

“You've read it? And the later editions—you, you know the differences?”

“No need to sound so surprised, Granger. Of course I've read *Hogwarts: a History*. I went to Hogwarts after all.”

She giggled through tightly closed lips, flat as she tried to house the sound inside her throat. She dropped her head into her hands, losing her fight against laughter. Her hands raked through her hair, snagging on tangled curls. Her laughter turned into frustration as she pulled her hands from her hair, wincing where she'd caught herself in a knot.

“Of course,” she said, quietly. And Draco wondered if she'd meant to say it only to herself. “Of course *you've* read it.”

He lifted a brow, completely thrown by the series of events he'd just witnessed.

“And what does that mean?” he asked, realizing only after he'd said it that his tone lacked all sense of accusation. He'd almost sounded friendly.

“Nothing,” she said. “It's nothing—well, it's ironic...hilarious, really. But nothing.”

That explanation did little to convince him she hadn't been laughing at him. However, considering the number of times he'd laughed at her, both to her face and behind her back, he probably deserved it if she had been. Weirdly, it felt like a bit of a break in a duel, a pause in combat where they didn't have to exist on opposing sides of something—of everything.

“Hey, Granger?”

She looked up from the book that had completely absorbed her focus. He wondered if she even remembered she was meant to be working. He almost laughed at the thought of her horror over misusing her working time; that seemed very much like something that would offend her swotty sensibilities.

“Yes?”

“Do you think Potter still has my wand?”

Her head jerked, a quick and violent tilt as her confusion registered.

“What?”

“My wand. From school. The one he took when—you know.” Draco drummed his fingers against the table, trying to channel his growing discomfort away from the impulse to occlude himself into the ground. “The one I have now is fine; it picked me and all. But my first one, I—I liked it better.”

She’d flushed pink again, but now she looked distinctly uncomfortable. She fidgeted in her seat, rocking side to side as her lips twisted between frowning and grimacing, brows furrowed.

“I don’t know,” she said. “I didn’t realize he never returned it to you—things were—there was a lot going on, right after. Knowing Harry, he probably just forgot.”

Draco rolled his eyes, trying to opt for indignation over the sudden surge of fury. It was his fucking wand. *His wand*. He didn’t have the luxury of forgetting it, even if Potter did. He pulled the anger in, tried to control it without freezing it; he’d grown so tired of the fog, of the swelling sickness in his stomach.

“Knowing you, he probably stashed it in your hair for safekeeping and now no one can find it,” he said instead, and it only looked like an insult if he squinted.

—

At the end of another day spent watching Granger suppress her

complete and utter glee at being allowed to work in the library—like anything about this job at his manor could be considered a gift—a hiss of pain pulled Draco from his reading.

A crash followed, not terribly loud, but loud enough to alarm him. Granger had disappeared into the second row of shelves and out of his sight several hours before. He stood, crossed the library, and stepped around the corner to find her on the ground, back against the first row of shelves, a hand pressed to her lip. A tiny stream of blood dripped down her chin, dipping below her jaw, and slipped down her neck.

Draco, decidedly unfamiliar with experiencing emotions of concern towards Granger, couldn't deny the swell of panic seeing her there.

"It's nothing—I'm fine," she started when she saw him.

Draco cobbled together a haphazard approximation of calmness despite what seeing her blood—especially seeing *her* blood in *his* home—did to him. He crouched beside her, pulling a kerchief from his trouser pocket. She moved to take it from him, but he wasn't offering. He simply leaned forward and dabbed the blood from her lip, noting the warmth of her skin as it seeped through the fabric. Slowly, he descended, following the trail of blood beneath her chin and down the column of her neck. He felt her swallow beneath his fingers.

He pulled away and looked down and the white linen, now painted in blood. *Mudblood*, he might have said once upon a time.

He folded the kerchief several times, enclosing the red stain inside it.

"Which one was it, Granger?"

One of the books had obviously caught her by surprise, despite her obscenely fastidious diagnostics. She pointed to a book lying several feet from them with a deep purple cover, distressingly similar to the color of the drawing room walls.

With a single spell he set the book on fire.

"Malfoy," she tried to protest, scrambling towards the book on what must have been instinct before she retreated again. There was no hope for it. He let it burn to ashes as she settled back against the shelf.

"Did it get you anywhere else?"

She held out her hand.

“Just a sting on the wrist—” she stopped. She probably saw it at the same time he did. She’d held up her left arm. She must have rolled her sleeves up sometime during the day; Draco didn’t remember the scar being visible that morning.

And now it was in his face, less than a foot from him.

He slammed down *hard* on his Occlumency. Freezing, freezing, freezing, until he felt absolutely nothing at all. No concern for her wellbeing. Even less concern for his. Shard after shard of imposing emotion flaked and discarded in his mind until nothing but willful control remained at the center of a dense, freezing fog.

“Are you using Occlumency right now?” she asked. “Harry was never very good at it, but it seems—”

“I’m not very good at it, either,” he said, focusing on his lungs, on his ability to take a deep breath, to soothe with oxygen as his words rolled off his tongue. His words flowed smooth as the surface of still waters, frozen lakes. “Mine is effective,” he said. “It performs a function. But you can tell when I’m doing it. With Aunt Bella you never knew. Or with Severus.”

She looked distressingly close to asking him another question, so he stood, smooth and serene like nothing could concern him.

“It’s near the end of the day. I’ll meet you in the parlor. If you wait there, I have a soothing paste in my potions lab I’ll get for you.”

“That’s not necessary, Malfoy. My hand is fine.”

“Please, Granger,” he said, applying spell-o tape to a new crack in his Occlumency. “Just wait for me.”

She nodded. He did the same. And he left her there, sitting on the library floor as he went to his lab to grab something to soothe the sting in her skin, wishing he had something to erase the scar there, too.

He was almost surprised, even with the occlusion, to find that she’d listened to him and waited. She sat on the velvet sofa, legs tucked beneath her. She’d rolled her sleeves back down.

He sat down next to her, too close. His knee knocked against hers and, if not for the ice freezing and seizing his muscles, he would have flinched, recoiled from it. Instead, he simply readjusted as he opened

the pot of soothing paste.

Perhaps it was the Occlumency, or something else—something deeper that he would not and could not acknowledge—but for the first time in his life he reached out and touched Hermione Granger's skin. Just her hand, turning it over and exposing the inside of her wrist that had turned a nasty purpling red, spreading like lightning bolts across her skin.

He only realized the intimacy of it after he'd done it: dipping his fingers into the paste and pressing it into her skin, rubbing in small circles to massage the paste into her flesh. Two hands on her now, several points of contact.

The fog in his Occlumency shifted to something that felt more like the fog of firewhiskey, the kind of haziness he felt when he'd had one too many: pleasant and warm and cushioning. He administered two applications, to ensure she wouldn't have any residual pain. And more distantly, to extend the length of time he could touch her, reveling in the warm fog inside his head, so much more pleasant than the frozen kind.

Carefully, reluctantly, he pulled his hands from hers and resealed the jar of soothing paste. For the first time since he entered the parlor, he dared to look at her face. He tried to let some of his Occlumency go.

Her eyes were wide, pupils too, a pink flush crawling across her cheeks; her mouth was partially open. He had a feeling she'd been staring at him for a while. He offered her the jar.

"Take this. In case any pain flares up over the weekend."

She closed her mouth, pressed her lips together, and then finally took the potion.

"This is—" she started, looking at the small pot in her hands, "—a really good brew, Malfoy. You're good."

He smirked, feeling the natural expression spread across his face.

"I'm a master."

She let out a short laugh and then looked at him again, leveling him with a kind of stare that he took to mean she once again had no idea what to make of him, like whatever she'd thought she'd known about him had just shifted. He had no idea what to make of himself, so he

could hardly blame her.

“I’ll see you on Monday,” she said, standing.

When she’d gone, Draco let his Occlumency fully drop. Months ago, he’d decided he didn’t want to stay at the manor, but he’d yet to do anything about it. Now, having had to witness another piece of this place hurt someone, he wasn’t sure he could bear another night.

—

Granger’s awful mood preceded her when she arrived through the Floo Monday morning: feet moving in a heavy, annoyed step. She barely spared Draco a glance, just stalked out the parlor and blazed a now familiar trail to the library. By the end of the day, Draco could catalogue in detail the finer points of Granger in a bad mood, down to her frustrated huffs and growls at inanimate objects. She even stomped her foot a time or two while staring at her runes, probably annoyed at the persistence of red.

Draco leaned back in his chair, watching as she jabbed her wand in the direction of a red rune hovering on a particularly unpleasant shelf. His chair creaked at the motion.

“Could you stop that?” she snapped, spinning around with her wand raised, hair flying out around her.

He leaned further into his chair: another creak. She let out a furious groan and spun back around, poking and prodding at her floating runes with her wand.

“Granger,” he said. “I’m asking you this with the most noble of intentions: what the fuck is your problem?”

She whipped back around, flushing red, everything about her crackling with the same energy she’d had that first day she showed up at the manor and faced off against his father.

“What’s my problem? *You’re* my problem. This family. This house. All this awful prejudiced shit is my problem.”

He leaned back in his chair, brows raised. *Creak* . A couple of months

ago, such a skewering might have debilitated him, might have crushed him with the guilt he already so effectively smothered himself with. But now, he had a suspicion there were several other words hiding behind the ones she'd hurled at him: different words for a different stressor. He knew the distraction technique well.

"Wow, Granger. Don't hold back, then. Anything else you'd like to get off your chest?"

"Yes, in fact." She stomped towards him—she'd truly refined her stomping technique throughout the day—and stopped right in front of him, hands on her hips. "Where did this personality come from? Who *are* you?" She waved a hand vaguely at his person.

He lifted a single brow, trying to decide if he had the energy to be offended. And he wasn't even occluding. If Granger hadn't been standing in front of him just waiting for an opportunity to strike, he might have allowed himself a self-congratulatory smirk at how well he'd managed so far that day.

"Do I dare inquire as to what you mean by that?" he asked her.

"I *mean* you are nothing like the Malfoy I knew in school. You're supposed to be mean and nasty and brooding and unpleasant. You're supposed to make fun of me, and not just little jabs at my hair because we both know you're barely even trying with those. You're not supposed to be all—studious and patient. And you're definitely not supposed to bring me ice cream when I fix your family heirlooms. Or heal me when something in this place does me harm. Who gave you the right to pretend like you have a personality outside of being prejudiced and being a—"

Draco didn't take the bait. He braced himself, resisting the impulse towards his mental wards. His first instinct was to fight back, defend himself. But he couldn't address her point about prejudice. He sidestepped it, but only just.

"Oh, I had a personality. Was capable of being fun, even. People *liked* me in school, even if your merry little gang of idiot Gryffindors didn't. And sorry, if after a megalomaniac took up residence in in my house, in my fucking head, for a couple of years I wasn't personable enough for you. Sorry about that. I was just trying to keep my family alive."

His fingers ached from his grip against the arm of his chair.

"Not yourself?" She was still heated, but her brows had loosened, no

longer tightly drawn together.

“Sure, if I could swing it. But I didn’t expect much for myself. I would have done anything to protect my parents.”

Her hands dropped from her hips. How they hell had they gotten here?

“Yeah, well. So would I.”

Draco felt stunned for a moment, like a rogue *stupefy* had found its way to the center of his chest. That statement—it had a lot to unpack. He pushed back from the table and used his foot to pull the chair next to him out as well. He lifted a hand, effectively offering her the seat.

“Would you care to elaborate on that?” he asked.

She sat, arms crossed. She let out a small huff as she landed. But she looked more defensive, less angry.

They sat in silence for several agonizing moments. Draco had just reached for his book again when she finally spoke.

“I had a fight with my parents over the weekend. It’s nothing.”

“Doesn’t seem like nothing if you’re coming into my home and taking it out on me,” he said, knowing he sounded more annoyed than he’d wanted to.

“Did your parents appreciate it?”

“Excuse me?”

“What you did for them. To protect them?”

That was his line. They’d crossed it. He couldn’t manage any longer without his Occlumency. He froze his veins and shielded his mind.

“And what exactly do you think I did?”

She looked sheepish: lips pursed, hands still crossed in front of her, eyes refusing to look in his direction. Perhaps she’d stumbled past a line she hadn’t intended to cross as well.

“You let them brand you,” her voice was quiet but it roared in his head. *Brand*. “You almost ripped your soul apart attempting murder.”

Draco had stopped breathing. Violent rage erupted inside him, an image of his hands around her neck, forcing her to stop speaking, snuffing the life and the words from her throat in a single motion. *Gods, make her stop* . Make her stop. Make her stop. But he'd sunken deep enough into his Occlumency that such a violent, intrusive thought, unlikely as he was to ever act on such a grotesque impulse, only felt like a twitch of indecision in his muscles.

"I'm just wondering if they appreciate the cost. What it did to you—how hard it must have been. And if they know you did it for them. That's all."

Draco couldn't breathe, could barely think. Everything about him had been held hostage by such a ruthless assessment of what amounted to most of his entire fucking life.

"Could you—not occlude, please? You're difficult to talk to like this."

He would have laughed if he could.

"You don't want me to stop right now, Granger."

She gave him a sad smile. He was dumbfounded. Utterly dumbstruck. And so very completely fucked. He gave her an answer all the same.

"No," he said. "I don't think they did."

She let out a small sigh, and, in an even smaller voice, "Neither did mine."

Chapter End Notes

Thank you, from the bottom of my heart, to everyone who has read, enjoyed, commented, and kudos'd this story. This last week has been extremely difficult and heartbreaking for me and I'm not exaggerating when I say that the bit of routine I clung to in posting this story has helped me more than I know how to convey. Further, seeing the enthusiasm, excitement, and comments on the last chapter brought me joy when I was in short supply. So thank you, so very, very much. I apologize for not having the ability to reply to comments on the last two chapters; I'm hoping to reply to as many as I can on this one. I appreciate you all!

I owe huge thanks to [icepower55](#), [Endless_musings](#), and [persephone_stone](#) for providing their outstanding beta services on this story! They have saved me from myself on a variety of occasions.

Chapter 6: -2.666, -2.750, -2.833

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

June

tick

Draco wobbled into the library fifteen minutes past nine with an enormous headache and a box of apple taffies under his arm. He spotted the nearest chaise: inconveniently located on the far side of the room, and under an obnoxiously bright window. He promptly collapsed onto it, closing his eyes against the light and allowing himself a smirk when he heard footsteps approaching.

“Where have *you* been?” he asked without opening his eyes, an effort to preempt the barrage of questions he suspected Granger had been a mere breath from speaking into existence.

“I could ask you the same thing,” she said. “You didn’t meet me at the Floo today.”

Behind closed eyes, he could almost discern a touch of disappointment hiding behind her haughty tone.

He didn’t say anything. Instead, Draco reached blindly into his box of candies and unwrapped one, popping it into his mouth while silently cursing Theo for thinking *it would be funny to pour out all the hangover potions*. Fucking idiot. He’d damn near asked for that experimental time turner just to get the potions back.

He heard her sigh.

“I actually took some of my time off this year—well, they forced me. I’m not allowed to accumulate any more until I’ve used some. The Ministry should have informed you I wouldn’t be here last week. It was a last-minute decision.”

Draco smiled to himself, blindly reaching for another candy.

“They did.” He opened his eyes, recoiling against the offensive

brightness in the room. “What did you do?” he asked.

“I stayed at home. I read a lot. Did some laundry, deep cleaned my kitchen.”

Draco sat up straight, ignoring the lurch in his stomach at the motion. He popped another candy in his mouth, wishing it had some kind of stomach-soothing properties. He forced himself to speak through the nausea. This was of critical importance.

“That’s appalling, Granger. That is *not* a holiday. That’s manual labor. Trust me, I appreciate cleanliness as much as anyone, but I’m not spending a holiday on it. Holidays are meant to be spent on beaches, or snow-covered mountains, or exploring ruined ancient cities. Even museums—which I enjoy quite a bit, but have been reliably informed are not a favorite holiday activity for most—would be preferable to *deep cleaning a kitchen* .”

That had been a lot of words. In rapid succession. Coupled with images of grease stains on kitchen surfaces. Draco felt unwell. Extremely unwell. He laid back down, one hand clutching his stomach and the other thrown over his eyes to block out the light. He opted, benevolently, to ignore the impolite snigger hovering somewhere above him.

“Well, I hardly have time to deep clean my kitchen otherwise. It was a good opportunity.”

Draco let the hand covering his face fall away, forcing his eyes open. He furrowed his brows, determined to convey his disbelief. That was ridiculous. She was Hermione Granger. Surely she had every hour of every day planned to the second, accounting for everything in her life, manual labor included.

She sighed again.

“I’m here from nine in the morning to seven or eight in the evening, five days a week. I don’t have an abundance of free time.”

He narrowed his eyes. He didn’t buy it. Alas—there were still alternatives preferable to wasting one’s free time on something so mundane as *chores* .

“You should have said something. I could have loaned you an elf for the week.”

“ *Absolutely not .*” Her voice pitched to a nearly inhuman sound, ricochetting between his ears and stabbing at an exceptionally painful place just behind his sinuses.

Despite the pain in his skull, Draco laughed: a cackle that lurched his stomach and amplified the pounding behind his eyes. It was worth it.

“I was kidding, Granger. I’m aware of your thoughts on the subject. I was witness to your *spew* days, after all. Though Topsy might have volunteered; she’s quite fond of you.” He groaned, pressure throbbing in his brain.

Granger looked torn between hexing him and pitying him, a not altogether unfamiliar expression for him to see warring on someone’s face. Disgraced son of a Death Eater and a victim of his circumstances? Or old enough and smart enough to know the consequences to his actions? Most days he didn’t know. Most days he’d say it was a little bit of both.

“What’s going on with you, anyway,” she asked. “You look like you’ve been hit by the Knight Bus.”

“Could have been, don’t remember much. I’m extremely hungover.”

“And eating candies at barely ten in the morning.”

Even Narcissa Malfoy would have been proud of Granger’s *you aren’t to eat sweets at this hour* tone.

“Birthday sweets can be had at any time of the day; everyone knows that. And if you plan to take that tone with me, then I won’t be sharing any with you.”

She cocked her head.

“It’s your birthday?”

“Yesterday, hence the candy and the hangover. Blaise mixes drinks like you wouldn’t believe, and Theo insists on having a good time until you literally can’t stand.”

Quiet, just for a beat.

“And your fiancée?” she asked, voice uncertain around the edges.

Draco might have rolled his eyes if the idea of engaging in such a motion didn’t send his entire head spinning.

“Astoria made an obligatory appearance, had an obligatory drink, and left before my friends became obligatory arses. All for the best.”

“Oh,” she said, and that was it. But he could see her processing, that same face of deliberate, debilitating thinking winding its way through every muscle, in every flicker of an expression. She had something on her mind, came to some kind of conclusion, but she let it drop, returning to her work and leaving him in blissful quiet as he slept off his hangover.

She could have truly gutted his home that day; he would neither have noticed nor cared.

—

“I have something for you,” Granger said in greeting as she stepped through the Floo later that month.

Draco lifted a brow, nodding to greet her as he always did, and turned to walk with her towards the library.

“Well, hold on,” she said. “You don’t want it?”

Draco turned back to her, puzzled. “Oh—it’s a thing? I just assumed you meant an obscure fact you wanted to tell me. Or an embarrassing story about Potter, you know those are worth actual gold to me. Or maybe a renewed proposal on how to free the manor’s house elves—”

“Oh, shut it Malfoy, and sit.”

She pointed at the tufted green velvet sofa.

“You’re kind of fun when you’re bossy,” he said beneath his breath, following her directions regardless and planting himself on the sofa.

She laughed.

“You did not feel that way in school. Anyway, here. I asked about it—I thought—well, it seemed only fair that you should have it back.”

She held out a long narrow box. He knew the shape of the box well, every witch or wizard did. How could they not? Draco tried not to gasp, tried not to look too thrown off kilter as he reached for it. He

slid the top of the box off and blinked, eyesight blurred for a brief second before it cleared again.

His wand. The wand he'd lost hope of ever seeing again. He occluded, just enough to steady himself as he reached for it. Without the safety of his barriers, he knew his hand would have trembled.

He felt the familiar rush of magic flow through him the moment his fingers touched the hawthorne handle. *Gods.* It was like discovering dry land in the middle of the ocean, steady and sure after what felt like years at the mercy of rocking waves. And Granger had given this to him. Granger, who now witnessed his unblinking eye contact with a wand.

"I—uh, do you need a minute?" she asked, shifting her weight from foot to foot, as if she couldn't decide if she should stay or go.

He tried to act casual, tried to look unaffected.

"I don't need alone time with my wand, Granger." He smirked for good measure.

He only realized the double meaning when she flushed, a rise of pink creeping up from beneath her collar. Her eyes widened as the *entendre* dawned on her, he assumed, in several layers of detail.

He wasn't sure if he wanted to laugh or feel equally as embarrassed.

"I didn't mean it like that—I just. It's different from my other wand. More familiar."

She fidgeted again, as if physically fighting off her embarrassment. But she smiled: a small thing.

"What's the difference, do you think?" she asked, opting to sit next to him in what felt like a wary sort of peace offering.

He cast a couple of showy charms: sparks, lights, little gusts of wind, a tendril of smoke. He levitated the box and let it come to rest on the end table again. He conjured a strip of green ribbon and sent it towards her hair, where it burrowed through her curls before it emerged, winding around and through it, binding it at the nape of her neck. Granger huffed in annoyance as she lifted her hands to find the ribbon.

"Probably the core," he said, finally answering her question as he

ignored her examination of what he'd done to her hair. Charms were so much easier with this wand; he'd almost forgotten how intuitive they could feel. "Unicorn hair instead of dragon heartstring. My newer wand may have more inherent power with the heartstrings, but this one, with the unicorn hair, it just—always felt more me."

"Unicorn hair," she repeated, softly, but with something like amusement peeking through.

He stopped fiddling with charms.

"Something funny about my wand?"

Gods. Schoolboy wand in hand and he already sounded exactly like he had back then, too: all bite and sneer and words meant to wound.

"No," she said, surprisingly calm considering the tone he'd just taken. "It's not funny, not at all. I'm just surprised."

"What do you have to be surprised about?"

"It's difficult to cast dark magic with a unicorn hair wand, that's all."

Oh .

Draco lowered his wand, letting it rest on his lap. He couldn't look at her.

"I know," was all he said. And really, he probably knew it more than most.

—

Draco spent the entire afternoon practicing charms. Pointedly, he ignored the occasional sounds of amusement he heard coming from Granger's direction as she worked on one of the many rows of history books his family had accumulated over the centuries.

He'd been deep in thought, watching the wisps of smoke from a fire charm dancing above his head, when Granger dropped an enormous tome on the table in front of him. He jumped at the thud and then scowled, not appreciating the smirk she lobbed at him.

“Lovely, Granger. What is this?”

“You know, you’re quite good at charms,” she said, eyeing the space above him where flames had danced moments before.

“Unicorn hair is good for charms and I—it was my best subject behind potions.” He frowned. “Don’t try to distract me, Granger. I can see the misdirection hiding in that fluff you call hair. What’s with the book?”

She reached, just briefly, for the ribbon still tying her hair back, as if to confirm that it hadn’t escaped its binds. She tapped her fingers on the cover of the book. Draco tilted his head, craning to read the spine.

“Do you—does your family—do you ever loan books out?”

He shouldn’t have smirked. The moment the corner of his mouth lifted, brow raised, she rolled her eyes and sighed. Her shoulders sank, and her hands slipped from the cover, tapping irritably on the table.

“Never mind, Malfoy. If you’re going to be a prat about it—”

“Why do you want to read a book on Sacred Twenty Eight genealogy? Lot’s of overlap, gets pretty repetitive.”

That earned him a small smirk in return.

“I was just—interested in understanding, better, where it comes from.”

It . Hatred for her very existence, she meant.

“You won’t find it in there, Granger. This book will only make it worse.”

One of her nails scraped against the wood grain on the table. Draco watched as her fingers flexed, twitched, formed a fist: the only indication of whatever thought had barreled through her. Normally so dynamic, the thoughts crawling across her face had stilled. No amount of connecting the dots between her freckles could make sense of her expression.

Her voice came out quiet, strained against her vocal cords in a register she didn’t normally use. “I don’t see how it can be any worse than wanting me dead.” Draco could hear the tension in her throat, fighting her words.

His stomach sank, despairing for her and embarrassed for himself and his family: a whole lineage of people who’d culminated in the current

disaster of the Malfoy name. He reached for the book and flipped it open. The enormous tome, thick as a cake, practically groaned as he cracked the long-disused spine. He thumbed to the Malfoy line, thick parchment stiff between his fingers as he turned through centuries, traveling back in time.

He found the page he sought and rotated the book towards Granger, sliding it back across the table. He pointed at the name at the top of the page and, next to it: blood status.

Muggle .

“Before the Statute for Secrecy. A very long time ago. This is what makes it worse, Granger.” He risked a glance up at her. Her lips were moving, mouthing the words as she read, eyes focused and growing glassy. She touched a finger to the name, some long-dead ancestor of his who didn’t have a single drop of magic in her veins. “Just shows you that none of it really mattered. Maybe it won’t make a difference for you. But for me, that makes it worse.”

“Is this”—she swallowed, a heavy motion—“normal? Common?”

“In pureblood families? Yeah, Granger. Things were different a few centuries ago, though you’ll have trouble getting most of the Sacred Twenty Eight to admit to any of it.”

“You just did.”

Draco twirled his wand between his fingers, watching as it spun. Anything to avoid looking at her.

“Yeah, well—I’m nearly as annoyed about it as you probably are.” In his periphery, he saw her shoulders sink by a fraction. “And not—shit, that probably sounded—I’m not annoyed because I have some muggle ancestors from the sixteenth century. I’m annoyed because it means—I don’t know, *nothing* .”

Draco wanted to sprint out of the library, remove himself from her presence as he’d started to slip, to stumble, to spill.

The library doors swung open, saving him from his impulse to disappear.

Draco groaned; they were early.

“Granger’s still here,” Theo nearly shouted, announcing his entrance.

Blaise trailed behind, a hint of amusement betraying his mostly impassive expression.

“Hello—” she started.

Theo thrust a hand at her, “Theodore Nott, call me Theo.”

She took his hand, a flash of confusion crossing her face.

“I—I know who you are, Theo. We went to school together for six years.” She tilted her whole body to peer behind him, “and hello, Blaise.”

“Oh, no, no, Granger. You should be thanking me for saving you from the mortification of having to admit you had no idea who I am. Classmates or not. Though, I’m annoyed you remember Blaise,” Theo said, taking a seat at the table across from Draco, next to where Granger still stood above the book. “This could have been very uncomfortable, for all parties. Me especially. Thank a bloke next time he saves you by being all”—a vague wave at his person —“magnanimous.”

“Fair warning, Granger, it sounds like Theo might be a little drunk,” Draco said, sending a pointed look in Theo’s direction.

Her face, which had slipped into outright awe at the show Theo had just put on, shifted. Her eyes widened, a smile twitching at the corners of her mouth, amusement hidden beneath the surface.

Blaise took a seat on the other side of Theo. He dragged a chair out next to him, a scrape of wooden legs against stone floors echoing through the space, and propped his feet up. No one spoke as they adjusted to the shift in dynamic, in the doubling of personalities in the room, quadrupling if you accounted for the sheer space Theo’s tended to take up.

Theo reached out and pulled the book towards him.

“Oh, how thrilling. Are we betting on incest? A classic, of course.”

Granger paled, watching as Theo flipped through the pages in the enormous book. Draco, appalled as he was, also wanted to laugh. She probably thought Theo was joking, but there had definitely been bets about incest in the past. Whose family had the most, the most recent, the most severe.

“Aha,” Theo said, trailing his finger down a page. He cleared his throat, “Cantankerous Nott married to Adelia *also* Nott, first cousins. Eighteenth century. I have furniture older than that.”

Granger craned to confirm what he’d read. Theo slid the book towards her.

“I do so love celebrating the day of my birth with an existential crisis about inbreeding.”

“Oh,” Granger said, closing the offending book and sliding it away from them. She hovered by the table; she wouldn’t have looked so out of place if not for the nervous chewing on her bottom lip and the rapid glancing between the three of them. “Happy birthday, Theo. You—must have plans, I’ll just wrap up my work for today.”

“No you don’t, Granger. As the birthday boy, I hereby request you stay and have fun with us.”

Granger looked dumbfounded.

“But—why? You don’t know me—you don’t even like me. Why would you want me here for your birthday?”

Theo laughed, “Draco likes you just fine, and I defer to his judgement in most things. Except on the acceptability of peacocks as pets. And on potions as an enjoyable discipline. And on the appropriate number of charms to keep one’s hair in place—”

“She gets the point, Theo.” Draco had gone still, pinned under the casual, blatant assessment that Draco not only didn’t actively disapprove of Granger, but rather, that he liked her. That could not—was not—no. He could tolerate her fine, act civil towards her, annoy her for amusement, but actively like her? That simply wasn’t allowed: a line too far that he would not, should not, could not cross.

Theo rolled his eyes and called for Topsy.

Crack .

Well, that certainly wouldn’t help Theo’s cause. Granger cringed. Her brows furrowed, her eyes narrowed, and she looked so hopelessly at Topsy—like every drop of magic in her bones wanted to crush the elf in a hug and offer her safe passage to another land—that Draco’s chest actually clenched. And that was ridiculous.

“Ah, Topsy, my sweet,” Theo said. He dipped his head and extended his hand in a low and dramatic bow-cum-handshake. “Mopsy returns your regards from the Nott Estate and wishes you good health on this summer solstice.”

The elf trembled under Theo’s formality, the tips of her long, drooping ears stained a maroonish-pink. Some days, Draco wondered if Theo’s antics were actually a strangely specific form of torture for Topsy, who could barely handle his praise and affection.

Topsy made several unintelligible noises, presumably an attempt to speak.

“Topsy, today is my birthday and Draco would like to break out several expensive bottles of liquor to celebrate, would you mind terribly popping to the main cellars and grabbing them for us? Feel free to dip into Master Lucius’s personal reserves as well, only the best for my special day and all.”

If Topsy vibrated with any more nervous energy she might simply pop out of existence. Draco dared a look at Granger. She watched Theo with her head tilted to the side, knuckles pressed into the table next to her, a look of wonder and confusion clouding her normally clear eyes.

Topsy made a squeaking sound and disappeared under the table, reemerging next to Draco. The elf looked up at him, waiting for confirmation of Theo’s request. The answer stalled on the tip of Draco’s tongue: *of course, yes, sounds wonderful* . But Granger had turned to him, watching. And suddenly the idea of having Topsy delivering several bottles of liquor when they could just as easily get it themselves—

Draco had lost his gods damned mind. He shook his head, not at Topsy, but more to clear his thoughts. Granger had hijacked his brain.

He risked a glance up at her and immediately regretted it. She looked so serious, so preemptively disappointed. *Well, that wasn’t fair* . Theo, on the other hand, looked like he couldn’t wait to see how this played out. And Blaise looked rather uninterested, staring vaguely in Theo’s direction as he balanced on two legs of his chair.

Draco looked back at Topsy. She stared up at him, eyes wide, the very face of pleading.

Draco swallowed, jaw tense.

“Yes, Topsy, that would be excellent.”

“Malfoy,” Granger said, voice low as her hands came down on the table.

“My house, Granger. She would have been heartbroken if I didn’t let her help with Theo’s birthday. She likes him more than she likes me —”

Theo cut in with an, “Obviously, I’m nicer to her.”

“I’m hardly *cruel* to her, Theo,” Draco said, jaw tensing and he tried to communicate via eye contact that he should not say things like that in front of Granger. A voice that sounded very much like a disinterested Blaise flared to life in the back of his head: *why does that matter?*

“The Malfoy elves are free, Granger.” This time, Blaise actually did speak. All the heads in the room swiveled to him. Theo pouted, Draco sighed, and Granger’s eyes grew round and wide.

“Don’t ruin my fun. Draco was right; she is fun to tease,” Theo said. He jumped to greet Topsy when she reappeared in a *crack*, levitating several bottles of liquor with her.

Draco could feel his mouth tightening, tendons in his jaw flexing under the force grinding his teeth together. Granger had turned to him again: anger etched in the line between her furrowed brows, the pursing of her lips, and the slight twitch at the corner of her right eye.

“You never said.” It sounded like an accusation.

“It was Ministry mandated, Granger. I didn’t think you’d find it especially impressive that we didn’t have a choice. Topsy and several of the others stick around because they want to.”

“Want to,” she repeated his words. “*Want to.*” Her voice pitched.

“Granger, it’s my birthday,” Theo said, wrapping her fingers around a shot glass, pulling her from where she’d held her palms open towards the sky, seeking Merlin’s ghost for support, no doubt. “Take a shot and shut up, I want to have fun now.”

Granger, for her part, allowed Theo to steer her to the seat he’d formerly occupied and, with almost no prompting, she downed the shot and grumbled a furious—and furiously endearing—“fine.”

Draco would never have bet, even if given the option to pick the most outlandish, unexpected outcome, that he would have the chance to witness a drunk Hermione Granger socializing with him and his friends. And having a damn good time, too.

To be fair, Draco had also indulged in several drinks, and if he moved his head too quickly, the room took a blink to catch up with him, slogging behind in slow motion. Theo seemed as wobbly and intoxicated as Granger, laughing easily and shouting most of his words for no reason. Draco couldn't tell how much Blaise had partaken, but he kept mixing delicious drinks for the rest of them, so he clearly still had adequate use of his motor functions.

"Theo. Theo— *Theo* ," Granger said, repeating the name with increasing urgency when she couldn't get him to look up at her.

They'd revisited the genealogy book, flipping between pages, laughing together at ridiculous, outdated names and *ooing* and *ahhing* over particularly scandalous unions. Draco and Blaise had started a very lazy game of poker to distract themselves from the constant screeching over *Felcuin this* and *Idoine that* and *my gods look at this; an eighty-six year age difference, that's barbaric* .

"No, it's true," Granger was saying, face hunched closer to the pages than necessary. "The Queen, Theo. The *actual* queen."

Theo laughed. "Granger the wizarding world hasn't had a queen in—I don't know. Millenia? Maybe ever? I'm drunk and it's a little fizzy, no—fuzzy. I didn't care for History of Magic."

"You got an 'O' on that NEWT," Draco cut in, letting his playing cards drop to the table. He and Blaise had mostly been pretending anyway.

Theo tapped a finger to his temple.

"Intuition," he said.

Granger's head shot up from where she'd still been intensively studying the book. She blinked rapidly, looked briefly like she might tip backwards, before righting herself and turning to Theo.

“You can’t use *intuition* in History of Magic—it’s about facts. You can’t
—”

“Don’t hurt yourself trying to understand how Theo does anything he does, Granger. It’s a mystery to all of us,” Draco said. He took a sip of his firewhiskey, enjoying how he could barely even feel the burn as the liquid slid down his throat, shooting off tendrils of delicious heat in his chest as it descended.

Granger looked at him, for the first time in what had likely been an hour of peculiar bonding between her and Theo. A flush of pink crawled up her neck, more of it smearing her cheeks. Her hair, still tied by the ribbon he’d charmed, had started fluffing out around her temples, giving her a wild sort of look. He wondered, seeing how glassy and distant her eyes had become, if his own were much of the same.

“I can also make portkeys that travel *inside buildings*,” Theo said.

And just like that, Draco lost her attention to Theo again. He sent his glass sliding across the table towards Blaise, who obliged him with a refill and an unwarranted look of assessment.

“You cannot,” Granger said.

“Yes I can. Draco, tell her. You’ve tested them.”

In another blink, he had her attention again. He liked her attention, it warmed him like firewhiskey.

“You tested illegal, experimental portkeys?” she asked.

“Didn’t you break into Gringotts?” he countered.

Her flush deepened beneath her freckles, from pink to near red as she dropped her gaze.

“You *what*?” Theo asked, slapping the table unnecessarily. The shouting had been enough to get the point across.

Granger lifted both of her hands, creating a blinder on one side of her head to effectively block Theo from her view. “How do you know about that?” she asked in a loud whisper when she finally looked at Draco again. She did an excellent job ignoring Theo poking at her palms.

“You broke into one of my family’s vaults. Of course I know about it.”

Draco expected her to drop eye contact, to look sheepish or embarrassed over the confirmation of her lawbreaking. Instead, still ignoring Theo trying to poke his way through her hands as she shielded one side of her face, she smirked.

Merlin, she smirked .

And it only got worse from there.

She dropped her hands, swatting at Theo as if they’d been best friends for years, and stood. She leaned over the table towards Draco, testing every ounce of his gentlemanly manners to not glance down a witch’s shirt when presented with the opportunity. He did it anyway, manners be damned. But his eyes were the only thing he seemed capable of controlling; every other part of him had frozen as she leaned over the table, giggling as she did so, stopping only when her face was distractingly close to his.

Voice dropped to a low whisper, a smirk still tugging at her pretty—pretty?—little mouth, “Do you know what I did after I broke into Gringotts?”

Draco was going to experience spontaneous combustion at the hands of Hermione Granger. He just knew it. *She smelled nice* . She was close enough that he could tell.

And she was relaxed, so at ease in a way he’d never imagined Granger even capable of being. He’d limited his previous impression of her to books and timetables and fastidious dependency on rules and order. But this Granger— *this Granger* knew how to have some fun.

And *fuck* she was pretty. And fun. And smart. And *fuck* .

He’d forgotten she was going to say something, lost in the inferno inside his own skull. But then her lips—apparently he’d been staring at them—moved.

“I rode a dragon.”

He honestly thought he’d imagined it. A sick, intrusive, wet dream kind of thought popping into his consciousness, sounding like Granger. But then she laughed, settling herself back in her seat across the table, and Theo said, “Did you say *dragon* , Granger?”

Draco felt like he'd been hit with a *confringo*, ablaze and blasted apart, heat roaring through him. He had to adjust himself in his trousers, as inconspicuously as possible, having grown inconveniently hard in a matter of seconds.

Across the table, Draco caught Blaise watching him, *seeing* straight through him, as he usually did. He watched as Blaise's eyes flicked quickly towards Granger and then back again. With a quirk of his brow and a contemplative look, Blaise took a sip of his drink.

"Draco, is your fiancée planning on making an appearance this evening?" Blaise asked after his sip.

Any fledgling, inappropriate erections Draco might have been nurturing died at the reminder that Astoria—well, that she was meant to *be* something to him.

"I don't know," he said.

"Shouldn't you?" from Blaise as Theo made an annoyed sound in the background.

"Why?" Draco asked. He noticed that the movement across the table from him had stilled; Hermione's giggling now absent.

"Well, because she's your fiancée. Do you not want to spend time with her?"

What in the ever-living fuck was Blaise doing?

"It's a betrothal agreement, not a romance."

"What a lovely foundation to build a life on."

If Hermione—wait? Hermione? No, Granger—hadn't been sitting directly across from him, silent and still and so obviously intrigued, Draco might have challenged Blaise to a duel just to burn off some of his anger. Some of the liquor, too.

But Blaise kept staring at him. Granger did, too, he suspected. Even Theo had gone quiet. What exactly did they want from him? His temple throbbed, the first sign that maybe he'd reached a limit, or should impose one.

"I didn't ask for it," he said, wishing in the same breath that he'd stayed silent. Because the three identical looks of pity, useless looks he

had no interest in, made him want to hex them all: one by one, and slowly.

But it was Theo's birthday, so he endured. Occlumency and alcohol did not mix; his magic became sloppy under the influence, but Draco tried anyway. Tried to freeze out, pack away and forget every last intrusively affectionate and unfortunately lustful thought he'd had toward Granger in that library. They weren't real thoughts, just the result of alcohol, boredom, or proximity.

He didn't *really* think any of those things about Granger. And he repeated that thought to himself, over and over again, right up until Theo asked her about her relationship with Weasley.

"Oh," she said. "We broke up last year."

It shouldn't have changed anything.

If he occluded hard enough, sloppy and mostly useless from the liquor, he could almost convince himself it didn't.

Chapter End Notes

a heartfelt thanks to all the lovely and kind comments on the last chapter! i'm so thrilled and honored to have so many outstanding folks enjoying this story; i'm genuinely overwhelmed! thank you so, so very much for reading and commenting and leaving kudos and being the truly outstanding folks you are!

my eternal gratitude to [icepower55](#), [Endless_musings](#), and [persephone_stone](#) saving me from myself on what has become an embarrassingly ongoing basis.

Chapter 7: -2.583, -2.666, -2.750

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

July

tock

Granger had clearly fought and lost a war with her hair before arriving at the manor. She stepped through the Floo with a frustrated huff, sounding frazzled as her hair fluffed out at odd, uncooperative angles. Worse, she kept reaching for it, smoothing it, twisting it, dragging her fingers through it, and making disappointed sounds every time she came in contact with another errant curl or egregious tangle.

Her electric, frantic energy calmed Draco in a strange way; it provided him with a pleasant reminder of normalcy. He'd grown too accustomed to whatever unwelcome feelings of fondness—and occasionally something else—had taken up residence in the places inside his brain formerly reserved for insults and irritation.

“Mane not cooperating today?” he asked in lieu of his usual greeting. He leaned against the frame to the parlor door, watching her process with open fascination.

She leveled an unamused stare in his direction as she attempted to twist her hair into a bun.

“You know, Granger. If you let it grow past your shoulders, the sheer weight of it would pull some of that frizz down.”

He resisted the urge to wince. He realized too late that such a statement suggested at least a tangential investment in her hair. Investment landed far too close to fondness for his liking.

She gaped at him, hands paused at the back of her head, mid-scuffle with a tangle of curls. He couldn't stand her stare, or the confusion dancing with curiosity across her face. He drew his wand.

“Shall I conjure another ribbon and save us all?” he asked. He tried to

ignore the ridiculousness prickling beneath his skin; he'd apparently doubled-down on whatever ill-advised stake he had in her hair and the potential relief its cooperativeness provided.

"Malfoy, I have so much hair. I couldn't possibly let it get any *longer*."

So she *had* heard him. He'd started to wonder, growing concerned at her excellent impression of a carp.

He gave a shrug, pocketing his wand again and folding his arms across his chest. "More hair but less hassle, would be my guess. This isn't uncommon knowledge, Granger."

She frowned, evidently settling on the haphazard bun she'd managed.

"Seems like an odd thing for *you* to know, what with that bone straight, blinding white coif you parade around with."

"My hair isn't straight—" he needed Theo's time turner. He needed to reverse those words, erase them from existence.

He groaned at the glee that erupted on her face as she advanced on him, helping herself to his personal space, staring up at him from barely a foot away.

"We all know about the smoothing potions and the sticking charms, but straightening, too, Malfoy?" She smiled through her teasing. For a moment, he almost thought she would reach out and touch his hair. He almost— *almost* —hoped she would. "You're essentially a caricature of yourself, you're so vain. You know that right? How curly is it?"

Carefully, Draco brought his hands to rest on either of her shoulders and, slowly, he pushed her away, forcing space from her invasion. Her amusement only grew as he steered her back.

"Slightly wavy, at most. And I know these things because rather riotous curls run the Black family. I've listened to my mother drone on the subject extensively."

Thankfully, that answer seemed to satisfy. He was glad she'd decided to put her hair up; it saved him from picturing how it might look longer, what it might feel like, how he might like to touch it. He blinked, recognizing the error of that thought. He froze it out, flaked it away, packed up. It meant nothing.

Ultimately, these thoughts were Ronald Weasley's fault. If that red-headed idiot had been able to keep Granger interested, Draco's reluctant fascination would still be held at bay out of begrudging respect for boundaries. On top of that, Theo had to coerce Granger into participating in his birthday festivities. Who would have guessed that she could be so much *fun* ?

Well, Draco had an idea before then. But seeing proof—with a side of drunken giggles and lectures on Queen Elizabeth I that Theo found endlessly quotable—had been something unexpected.

"Where's the sofa?" Granger asked, surveying the room with suspicion, craning her neck as if a better view of the large, open space might suddenly reveal a tufted velvet monstrosity hidden in plain sight.

He hadn't necessarily expected it to slip her notice, but he didn't expect her to sound so—concerned?

"I—uh, I took it with me." He rubbed at the muscles on the back of his neck, probably looking woefully self-conscious.

She blinked, processing.

"Took it with you where?"

"My flat. I—got my own place."

"Oh."

"I didn't want, well—I couldn't, really. Live here anymore."

Draco wanted to rip his own tongue from his mouth and light it on fire. He'd been reduced to an inarticulate idiot under Granger's inspection. And over what? A sofa that had become a strange third party in their day to day?

"Well, that's a shame," she said. That bewildered him. Briefly, he thought she might mean it was a shame he didn't want to live in the manor anymore, as if anyone in their right mind could. But then she continued, "I was rather fond of that sofa."

She gave him a smirk, brushing past him on her way out the door, beginning their usual path to the library.

"Perhaps we should consider a custody arrangement," she added.

Evidently her frustration over her hair had transformed into a kind of playfulness about the sofa. Draco hadn't been prepared for that. On the handful of occasions where their conversations skewed this way—a little fun, a little playful—he found himself stunned each time at how easy it could be, not acting in total opposition to Hermione Granger. It was dangerous, shaky ground at the edge of a cliff; he ought not tread too far.

“I don't know if that's necessary, Granger. I do use it significantly more than you.”

“That's hardly my fault. I'm working during the day and don't have access on weekends.”

They stepped into the library and he almost said something else, felt the traitorous words lingering in the back of his throat, a breath from jumping off a cliff from which there would be no return. Instead, he said nothing. Neither did she.

In the awkward end of their banter, the air in the room thickened, tensed: simmering. Maybe he didn't give Granger enough credit. Maybe she could hear his unspoken invitation dying to be spoken into existence: *you can come over whenever you'd like* . Or maybe she couldn't. He had no fucking clue.

“Do you like it?” she asked.

“Like what?”

“Your new place.”

“Oh. Yes, it's fine.”

“Were your parents—alright with you leaving?”

Draco laughed, taking his usual place at the large reading table in the center of the room. Instead of heading straight to work, Granger walked with him. She leaned against the table—close enough to cause distraction—intent on getting her answer.

“I didn't tell them,” he said, crossing an ankle over his knee and leaning back against the chair. He folded his arms and lifted a brow, waiting for it—

“What do you mean *you didn't tell them* ? Surely they've noticed—”

“I take meals with them, I’m here most of the day. But instead of retiring to my wing in the evenings, I leave. And I’m paying out of my trust, which I’ve controlled since I came of age. They have no reason to know.”

She looked suspicious, tapping her short nails against the table as she thought. He hadn’t convinced her with his attempt at a casual explanation.

“So they just—don’t notice you’re gone all night?”

“We hardly have midnight meetings to discuss our nightmares, plentiful as they may be.”

She softened; the one hand that had been on her hip, demanding answers through posture, slipped to her side instead.

“Well—I’m happy for you.”

He tore his gaze from the way her fingers twisted at the edge of her blouse, wrapping the fabric around her index finger in a way that, with a bit more movement, would probably reveal a peek of the skin beneath.

Draco mentally shook himself. He’d once been so obsessed with her being better than him, smarter than him, less worthy of the success he thought should come to him instead, that he’d never noticed anything else about her. And now, he’d done a poor job of preventing a new reality wherein he not only wanted to invite Granger to see his new flat, but wherein he wanted to invite her to do great many other things, on the sofa or otherwise. With enough control, he could pretend those thoughts didn’t exist. And yet they kept seeping in, dampness through cracks he couldn’t fully cover.

Draco couldn’t think any of those things about Granger, couldn’t even consider thinking them for a slew of reasons. First and foremost, because thinking them made him a creep, and lecher, and leer, and whatever other names existed for men bound by betrothal agreements who suddenly found themselves *fascinated* by their former childhood adversaries currently working well over forty hours a week in their home.

In reality, he knew there was probably just one single name for such a specific set of circumstances: Draco Lucius Malfoy.

Sweat rolled down Draco's back. Annoyed and uncomfortable, he considered launching a cauldron out the nearest window in frustration. He'd long since discarded the outer robes he'd worn to brunch with Astoria, and if not for the blackened brand seared into his left arm he would have rolled up his sleeves, too.

Six active cauldrons was too many to manage at once. Five too many, he imagined most would say. At least three too many, for him. But the more cauldrons he ran at once, the more variance he could test in a single brewing session, and the faster he could identify which ingredients would perform how he wanted them to in order to remove dark magic from cursed scars.

He also desperately needed to move his brewing set up to his new flat. But he hadn't figured out how he could explain away the absence of the lab he'd thrown together in the manor despite his father's sneering about menial labor and how Malfoys need not work.

One of the cauldrons overflowed, its formerly vibrant turquoise color evolving into a putrid green that splattered as thick, viscous bubbles popped, spilling over the rim and onto the table.

Draco *evanesco'd* the mess before it could damage the worktop or spread any further. He grumbled a string of exceptionally colorful curses; he'd had high hopes for that particular brew. Cauldron cleared, he wiped the sweat from his forehead and shoved his hair back, furious about his failing hair charms on top of everything else.

"What a lovely and creative use of language, my darling."

Draco looked up. His mother stood by the door, one hand pressed against the frame as if holding her in place: keeping her from intruding any further, but preventing her retreat.

Despite his preexisting flush from the heat of various potions fumes, Draco felt embarrassment creep in, likely deepening whatever redness had taken up residence beneath his normally pale skin.

"Mother," he said. "I apologize—"

"You did not know I was here. It's alright, Draco." She dropped her hand from the door frame. "May I join you? I've seen so little of you

lately.”

“Of course, yes”—he transfigured an empty crate from the greenhouses into a stool—“please, sit.”

She approached but remained standing, focused instead on the magic he’d just done, and the wand he’d used to do it.

“Is that your Hawthorn wand?” she asked. She reached out like she might want to examine it. Draco quickly cast several stasis charms on his potions, ridding the air of fumes, and conjured himself a stool as well. Narcissa dropped her hand. Draco didn’t much like the idea of someone else taking his wand, even her.

“Granger got it for me—from Potter.”

He watched Narcissa’s lip curl, then freeze, at the mention of each name: displeasure in conflict against burgeoning respect. Draco doubted he could ever understand how his mother felt towards Harry Potter. It seemed everyone had to have some complicated fucking relationship with the-boy-who-would-not-die, his mother included.

“That was”—she took her stool, hands folded neatly in her lap—“thoughtful of the girl.”

The girl was certainly better than *mudblood*. At least Narcissa had the good graces to avoid such inelegances in casual conversation.

“I asked for it back.”

A tension across the line of her shoulders sank, relieved, and Draco couldn’t imagine a reason why. She smiled at him and then let her gaze wander, examining his potions lab. Her smile curled into a sneer—Draco only saw it because he’d been watching—before she corrected, expression smoothing back to a smile.

“Draco darling, why have you been spending so much time in here? Your father and I are thrilled you’ve pursued a mastery—but these things are meant to be hobbies, dear, nothing more.”

Her assessment of the six cauldrons he’d been working with clearly indicated she knew he’d moved beyond hobby level. And she wasn’t wrong. This was neither hobby nor profession. This was obsession and Draco knew it.

It was all he could think about.

He preferred to imagine that his mother didn't outright disapprove of his work; she simply didn't understand it. The valley between the things she didn't understand about him and his willingness to teach her had stretched too wide to travel; he'd grown weary.

She must have taken his silence as an opportunity to elaborate.

"You don't need to *do* things, darling. These kinds of practical skills—of course, your education is respectable—but you needn't use your hands to do work. That sort of labor is undignified; you're a Malfoy."

Draco made a point of setting his wand on the countertop, unclenching his hands, and doing everything else in his power to remain level-headed, reasonable. Because as weary a traveler as he was, the taunts from the valley, unintentional or not, still slipped beneath his skin and stung of his failure to cross.

"Mother, I'd like for my hands to do something productive. Something good."

He could do this. He could have this conversation with his mother. She was not Lucius. She knew the taste of compassion even if she did not partake of it often. And she loved him, Draco knew that. Whereas most days Draco tended to believe his father loved the idea of him, more than who he'd actually grown to be.

The sad smile she gave him twisted Draco's stomach. She reached out to rest her hand atop his. Even though he knew, intellectually, that he'd put all his potions under a stasis charm, he could have sworn he smelled something sour, something rot.

"You could do so much more if you considered working with the family interests."

"I can't say I share many of those."

He'd said it before he even realized he'd thought it. He was an idiot; he should have occluded the moment she walked in the door.

But instead of twisting into a sneer, Narcissa's smile dropped into a frown. She squeezed his hand.

"We are family," she said, as if that could answer anything, everything.

Draco loved her. He really did. And she loved him. But they had no

idea how to navigate this, on opposite sides of a valley neither could—or would—cross.

He pulled away from her touch.

“What is it you’re working on?” she asked, folding her hands back in her lap as if nothing had happened.

A *potion*, a snide part of him wanted to say.

“I’m experimenting.”

“On what?”

“A healing potion.” He hesitated, unsure how much he was willing to give. “I’d like to be able to remove cursed scars.”

He saw the moment her eyes darted to his chest, lingering on the lines she knew hid beneath his shirt, on the trail of one poking out from his collar and crawling up his neck. It made him sick, realizing she thought he meant for himself, for his own scars.

He hadn’t even considered it. None of this had ever been about himself.

Correcting her would have been too much hassle, so he let her think it of him.

—

Draco should not have tested his potions on his own scars. That much became evident the second time he gave himself burns so severe he had to brew a skin regeneration potion for a patch on his lower stomach so grotesquely sizzled that he didn’t have enough skin left to heal.

Each morning, Draco winced as he buttoned his shirt, taking care to hold the fabric away from his torso, where whole stretches of his *sectumsempra* scars had turned a painful array of colors. Some pink and irritated, others purpling and mottled, one near his hip had turned a nasty green color and throbbed every time he breathed too deeply. Tucking his shirt into his trousers became an exercise in withholding a pained hiss even though no one would have heard if he

relented.

He glanced at the clock, one of many objects Granger had cleansed of dark magic in the Floo parlor. He'd only gotten four hours of sleep that night—with almost no nightmares to speak of—but he'd stayed up too late brewing, sneaking away from the manor somewhere around half two in the morning.

Breakfast service started at eight sharp, and Astoria would be present this morning: a casual opportunity to discuss fabric swatches or seating arrangements or some other wedding planning topic that made his head spin. Did they have a date? It occurred to him that this was something he should probably know, and yet—he found he'd rather delay that inevitability as long as possible.

Early morning at the manor had a distinct sound to it. Condensation that clung to the stone walls, even many of the interior ones, muffled the way sound normally echoed in an eery, surreal sort of way. Morning light had a different color to it too: crisp, bright, almost hopeful.

He preferred the manor in the mornings. It meant he'd survived the night.

That hadn't always been a given.

He greeted his mother, father, and betrothed out in the gardens where, in a whimsical break from their painfully consistent routines, they'd agreed to share breakfast amongst the flowers as they discussed the wedding. The ones doing the agreeing had been, of course, Astoria and Narcissa. Lucius already had a copy of the Daily Prophet open in front of him where he sat at one end of the small table, clearly intent on excusing himself from participation. Draco, however, had no choice in the matter.

He kissed both his mother and Astoria on the cheek, hardly ignorant to why that fact might stick out to him.

"Darling you're looking tired, you mustn't spend so much time with those experiments of yours."

Astoria's eyes found him, a Ravenclaw curiosity sparkling in her irises.

"Experiments?" she asked.

Lucius folded his paper down, drawing Draco's attention. He didn't

speak, but his disappointed glare said enough.

Draco wanted to roll his eyes, shake his head at the predictability of it. Sometimes in the morning, when he remembered how pleased he was to have survived the night, Draco found his father's general distastes almost amusing. How tiring it must be, hating so much, appreciating so little?

He resisted his disrespectful impulses and turned back to Astoria.

"With potions. A hobby."

She smiled, taking a small sip of her tea.

"Sounds interesting," she said.

"Frustrating, more so. My failure rates far outnumber my successes."

Astoria parted her lips, nearly forming another question. It looked like they might actually engage in a relatively easy conversation about something that didn't make Draco want to slip into unconsciousness.

His mother interrupted. She wore a serene smile and smooth features, but Draco saw the desire to change topics to something more palatable in the unsettling way her brows didn't move, not even a millimeter, as she spoke.

"Let's not get distracted. This is a working breakfast, after all."

Astoria tittered a polite laugh, setting her tea down with those fine, delicate hands of hers. Birds chirped in the distance, reminding him of cages and claws. Whatever small interest he might have had in her dissipated at the sound of that laugh. The socialite laugh, the polite laugh that wasn't even a laugh. It was a social language crafted by women, for women, to communicate any variety of things Draco didn't have the first inclination how to understand. He only knew he'd heard his mother and all her friends engage in it, ad nauseam, at nearly every social event he'd been forced to attend throughout his life.

"—the guest list."

His mother's voice brought Draco out of his descent into annoyance. There'd been very little about planning his wedding that piqued his interest; the guest list did.

“You received the owl with my list, yes?” Astoria asked.

His mother made a demure sort of sound in acknowledgment, “Thank you, dear. And it wasn’t too long at all. We’re fully intending to engage in a little grandeur. We anticipate your wedding will be the most magnificent social event of the year.”

Year. Which year? Not *this* year, surely. She must have meant next year.

“Draco, it’s been decided that Pansy Parkinson will be receiving an invitation,” his mother said.

No, sprang to life inside his head. It would be uncomfortable, awkward. If he could voice those two letters, this conversation could be so much simpler.

“Mother, I’ve barely spoken to her since Hogwarts.”

“Which I don’t understand, darling. She was once a very close friend.” His mother did not look at Astoria when she spoke.

For a moment, Draco’s chest tensed, sorry for the girl sitting here with them and the implication that it once might have been someone else. Because that’s what Narcissa meant. There had been talks, casual ones, but talks nonetheless between the Parkinsons and the Malfoys.

“My social life didn’t exactly thrive under house arrest.” He ignored the appalled look his mother gave him. Apparently she forbade talk of probation at the breakfast table. “We’re not really friends anymore.”

“She’s still close with my sister,” Astoria said, and Draco heard several other statements buried beneath it as she looked at him with her pretty blue eyes, so similar to his mother’s.

“We dated,” he told her, tired of all the things they weren’t really saying.

His mother’s teacup came down a fraction too hard against her saucer, clinking with a telltale force of disappointment. She’d likely admonish him for being rude, uncouth in front of his intended the next time they were alone.

“The Malfoys have been close with the Parkinson family for generations. We even stood by Simeon during that scandal over his foreign wife.”

“Pansy’s mother is from Japan, not the moon.”

Narcissa’s lip curled, completely at odds with her words: “And Sakura is a lovely pureblood witch.”

Draco could hear Pansy’s voice in the back of his head, hissing the correct pronunciation of her mother’s name, a favorite pastime at social events.

“I don’t mind that you dated,” Astoria offered with a sweet smile. Kind Astoria, trying hard enough for the both of them.

She didn’t want a loveless life, he could see that in these small gestures, in every attempt she made to connect. Draco didn’t want that, either. But that didn’t mean he wanted it with her. *Gods*, and it gutted him. This could be so much easier if he actually felt something, *anything* , for her. Even irritation would do, annoyance. But all he felt was blandness: porridge and cream biscuits and under-steeped tea.

He reached for her hand across the table, brimming with objections: he hadn’t seen Pansy in so long, a wedding wasn’t the place for those kinds of reintroductions, his annoyance at Astoria’s own sister for suggesting Pansy distance herself from him, and how he didn’t know how to be her friend anymore.

With the benefit of hindsight, he might have acknowledged how much of his own history was tied up with Pansy’s, and how horrified the idea of confronting all that made him.

“I trust you ladies to make these decisions,” he said in lieu of the truth.

Astoria smiled, but Narcissa raised a brow.

“You don’t want any input in your own wedding?” she asked.

Lucius made a sound from behind his paper but didn’t contribute anything else. Draco didn’t miss the sharp look Narcissa sent in his direction, despite the fact that Lucius couldn’t even see it from behind a headline about Potter’s exploits in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement.

“I trust your opinion,” he told her, taking a sip of his own tea to drown what he would have rather said.

Specifically, he would rather have told her that he very much wanted

input on his own wedding. Lots and lots of input. Particularly over his choice of bride. But without that, where was the point in the rest of it?

“You’re in a foul mood,” Granger said—casually, simply, far too easily—as she set a stack of books on the table.

Draco counted as he exhaled, staring at the word *anticlockwise* in the book in front of him, before he looked up at her. Of course he was in a foul mood; he’d had to discuss his impending nuptials over breakfast. Furthermore, several scars across his torso wouldn’t stop burning.

“And?” he asked, seriously considering Occlumency. It could be worth the unsettled stomach and the foggy head.

“Just an observation,” she said with a shrug.

“I doubt that. You’re hardly subtle.”

He tried to return to his book, the word *anticlockwise* sticking in his brain, he couldn’t seem to get past it every time he tried. She wanted to interrupt again; he could feel it crackling in the silence around them.

“Can I borrow these?” she asked.

Draco lifted a brow and glanced over his book.

“Sure, Granger.”

She didn’t return to her work, still standing across from him, probably staring at his failed attempts at reading, if he had to guess. With a heavy sigh, he conceded and closed his book.

“Yes?”

“I’m done.”

“Done?”

“With the library.”

Draco's brow furrowed. He let his eyes sweep the enormous space. It didn't seem possible.

"Are you certain?" he asked.

She propped her hands on her hips, indignation shooting to the surface of her features.

"Of course I am. I've been working on this one room for almost three months."

His brows lifted, no longer suspicious, but confused.

"Has it been that long?"

"It has."

He hummed a noncommittal noise.

"You're not occluding are you?" she asked, pressing her hands on the tabletop and leaning over it. Far too similar an action to when she'd nearly crawled on top of it, whispering about riding dragons.

"What are you doing?"

"Trying to get a closer look at your eyes. That's where I can see it best."

Draco blinked. Rapidly. A feeling of exposure, of being scraped raw: fresh skin, bleeding gums, and exposed gray matter.

"I'm not occluding." He looked towards the window, ignoring her huff at his uncooperativeness.

"Then *what* is it with you today?"

"I'm reading."

"You're silent. You haven't made fun of my hair once. And I tripped earlier; you didn't make a single comment about my lack of grace. I thought we'd—I don't know. Exited the Cold War already."

"Granger, what on earth makes a war cold?"

She shook her head, "that's not what I meant—"

"And this isn't a social call," he said, interrupting her. "You're here to

work. I'm here to supervise." And if he repeated that enough, maybe it could start looking like the truth.

She was kind of pretty when he made her mad. And he shouldn't notice things like that.

She propped her hands on her hips again. She'd reeled like he'd said something horrible. He'd only meant for it to be the truth.

"Well, I'm done working in here. The library is finished."

"I suppose you can go, then." He pushed, needing distance. She was too close.

"It's only three in the afternoon—"

He pushed harder. "Take the rest of the day."

He didn't even bother offering a reason or an excuse. He tried to make it sound like an order from an employer to an employee, which wasn't technically the nature of their relationship, but it was the only thing he could think of.

Her lips pressed together, rolling between her teeth as she repressed whatever it was she wanted to say.

He prepared to push again, too fascinated with her mouth in that moment. He'd spent the morning planning his fucking wedding. He couldn't be distracted by Hermione Granger's mouth.

She pushed instead.

"Fine." She forced the words out through a clenched jaw. And when she left, she forgot the books she'd wanted to borrow.

Chapter End Notes

i want to thank everyone so SO much for the lovely and kind comments on the last chapter! y'all are honestly some of the kindest and loveliest folks around. truly. if you're on the dept. of fanfiction discord server, i have inexplicably been given my own author channel where you can chat about chapters and engage in conspiracy theory timelines about things to come. it's a really good time, y'all should pop in! (if you need a link to the discord shoot me a message on tumblr and i can send you one!)

are we even surprised by how many thanks i owe [icepower55](#),

[Endless_musings](#), and [persephone_stone](#)? we shouldn't be. they're outstanding, glorious human beings who have helped me refine this story over many, many hours of work. honestly, y'all should pop into discord just to tell them how outstanding they are. because they are.

Chapter 8: -2.500, -2.583, -2.666

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

August

tick

The Cold War, Draco learned from Theo who'd learned from Granger during their *afternoon in Diagon Alley together*, was a sort of war without any fighting. It was a muggle thing, had something to do with the Russians and the Americans. Draco tuned most of it out, hung up on the fact that Theo and Granger had become friendly. So friendly that they'd met up for lunch in Diagon Alley and then spent an afternoon shopping and *boyfriend hunting*.

That last part certainly didn't bother Draco at all. And he most certainly didn't feel any relief when Theo clarified that they'd been hunting for a boyfriend for him, without luck, apparently. Draco mostly couldn't wrap his head around the idea that Hermione Granger had no problem spending time, in public, with Theodore Nott.

"Did people not stare at you?" Draco asked, regaining his composure after having nearly spluttered his wine across the chessboard between them.

Theo poked his knight; it seemed reluctant to move, perhaps sensing an impending capture by Draco's castle.

"Some. But she said people stare at her anyway. And it's not like I've never been stared at before, at least once someone realizes who I am."

The knight finally moved, a begrudging trip to its new square.

"And that wasn't—uncomfortable?"

Draco captured the knight, placing Theo's king in check. Theo sighed, but when Draco looked at him he had his head tilted, the beginnings of a smirk twitching at his mouth as he tapped a shard of his fallen knight against the board.

“These questions aren’t selfishly motivated in any way, are they?” Theo asked, moving a bishop to protect his king.

No.

Of course not.

Absolutely absurd.

“Because if they were,” Theo continued, entirely unaffected when Draco captured his bishop. “I’d only have supportive things to say.”

Theo paused, the sincerity of his words seemingly catching up with him, and then grimaced.

“Don’t hurt yourself,” Draco said.

Theo flicked a piece of his shattered bishop at Draco. “I’ve just suffered sincerity for you. You can at least admit it.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” But Draco’s heart rate had increased; he could feel it in his neck, against the collar of his shirt. He moved his castle, clearing the path for his queen. Checkmate.

—

After the library, Granger cleared the entire hallway leading away from the Floo parlor in a matter of days. Outside of enormous libraries and house elves constantly delivering new trinkets for her to examine, her work could apparently be done in the less affected areas of his family home with relative ease.

It wasn’t that they were back in their Cold War—or whatever other muggle comparisons she wanted to make about the state of their working relationship—but more that Draco simply couldn’t decide how to behave around her. He oscillated between heavy occlusion to chip away every unwanted emotion—substantially less irritation these days, and substantially more of something *else*—and concerted efforts to have normal, civil conversations with her.

It was both more comfortable and significantly less hassle to try and act as if they weren’t Hermione Granger and Draco Malfoy when they interacted. But he couldn’t maintain that illusion when he realized

she'd started wearing long sleeves, even in the heat, to cover her scar. Nor could he forget such things when the same heat made him want to roll up his own sleeves, only to be reminded of the hideous brand on his arm. The worst, though, were the times when he felt a bolt of something entirely inappropriate towards her, making pretend niceties an impossibility to maintain. They became *Hermione Granger* and *Draco Malfoy* again: emphasis insurmountable.

"We should move to a different wing," he said, trying to reroute her after she finished dampening the dark magic attached to a bust of Lucius Malfoy I. According to her ever-present diagnostic runes, it was the last object in the corridor leading from the parlor that required her attention.

Today, he'd tried avoiding occlusion, but he wouldn't last much longer if she insisted on tackling the south hall.

"This is the next logical place to clear," she said, shoving up one of her sleeves—the right one—before she paused, pulling it back down again.

"That's the guest wing," he said.

They stood facing a long hallway. At the end, a set of stone stairs led to two other floors, one up and one down. Several doors and archways punctuated otherwise blank swaths of stone wall. Draco's skin prickled just looking at it.

"What does that matter?" She threw her question over her shoulder as she marched into the hallway, ignorant to his misgivings.

"We've had"—Draco took a step forward, tangentially pleased his stomach didn't immediately drop—"many unpleasant guests. Especially during the war."

That stopped her, one foot hovering before it finally came down on the stone floor. A number of paces ahead of him, she turned, swallowing.

"Unpleasant guests?"

"Him. His people."

Granger had the good grace to look unsettled. This may have been the entire purpose of why the Ministry had sent her here, but this hall was something else—something more. No one used it, not in years, not

since *then*. There was no rush to subject themselves to it.

He tried to elaborate. “I believe my father really did make an effort to bring as many cursed objects we knew about to you, especially from this hall. But I anticipate it will still be extremely unpleasant. There’s at least one room on the next floor that we haven’t been able to open since the war.”

“So what do you suggest?” she asked.

“There are several other wings that need attention.”

“This is my job.”

“Oh, is it? How disappointing. I was under the impression these were social calls.”

She rolled her eyes, hands finding her hips. “I know what I’m doing.”

“I know—I know you do. I’m just—suggesting an overabundance of caution, perhaps delay this part of the manor for a while more.”

She didn’t budge. Not even an inch. She didn’t even dignify his concerns with a response. She just stood there, brows raised, eyes narrowed, heels dug in as deep as she could get them: a vision of stubbornness.

Finally, “Please let me do my job.”

His teeth clicked together as his jaw snapped shut. Stubborn fucking witch.

“Fine.”

He sighed, conjured a chair for himself, and tried to bury his anxiety in potions theory.

—

The problem was in separating the curse from the flesh. Simple in theory, a complete cunt in practice. If Draco could get the curse to release its grip on the skin, then the rest of the healing would only require a bit of scar paste. Everything he’d tried thus far had resulted

in burns and scabs and dark magic fighting back, staking ownership over the scarred skin and reacting violently at the suggestion it vacate.

Draco crossed several items off his list of rare potions ingredients, already foreseeing unpleasant reactions with the base healing potion he'd been using. He'd have to place a few special orders to acquire those that had promise; many were hardly things grown in his family greenhouses. Perhaps Theo would have some at his Estate.

"Malfoy," Granger spoke from nearby.

He drew a line through an entire paragraph of exceptionally unhelpful herbs, not looking up. He hadn't expected to hear from her for hours, honestly. She'd been so determined to force this hall into submission.

"Hmm?" he offered as he paused, considering the implications of acquiring and adding dragon's blood to the current iteration of his brew.

"Malfoy." Her voice came softer. He sighed. He'd finally settled into his work after she'd insisted on tackling these particularly unpleasant rooms.

"Yes?" he asked, making a point this time to continue evaluating the list of ingredients in front of him.

"Draco."

That got his attention, head snapping up, torn from his work with an almost violent force: stunned by the use of his given name.

He dropped his list, scrambled to his feet, and cancelled the transfiguration on his chair all in the span of a single gasp. Granger cradled her right arm. The veins beneath her skin glowed a bright, angry red, creeping and crawling up her forearm and her bicep. Her sleeve had been cut open, probably a slicing hex she'd done to assess the damage. Her fingers and her hand glowed almost entirely red: webs of bright red veins. Draco's stomach flipped; her fingers seized, rigid muscle that wouldn't relax. The tension in her hand hurled him back in time, memories of his own fingers torqued in agony under the Cruciatus. His head spun from the sudden need for Occlumency.

Her voice didn't even tremble when she spoke, low and a little bit breathy. He didn't miss the glassiness in her eyes though, tears about to fall.

“I’ve stopped the spread,” she said. “But I’m not familiar enough with this type of blood curse to reverse it.”

“Why are you so calm?” Draco asked, not sure what else to do. Should he touch her? Should he give her space? His whole body had stalled in panic, in indecision. He leaned deeper into his Occlumency, trying to freeze out the heat of panic, trying to slow his heart’s frantic beating.

“I’m not calm. I’m actually feeling really unsteady—could you please help me to the Floo? I need to go to St. Mungo’s.”

She’d said one thing, but acted completely the opposite.

“You—this is you *not calm*? In an emergency?”

Right, an emergency. He finally moved, wrapping her good arm around his waist and hating the inappropriate thrill that tensed his muscles and sent heat rushing up his spine. He cast a featherlight charm on her and she immediately sagged in what he hoped was relief over not having to hold up as much of her own weight.

She held her jaw tight. A tear broke from her lids but she barely blinked, determination evident in every measured breath, every step she took for herself.

If this was Hermione Granger not calm, The Dark Lord never stood a fucking chance.

—

“Why are you here?” Granger asked, entering the waiting area at St. Mungo’s where Draco had spent almost three hours, bored out of his mind. He sat, he stood, he occasionally paced, irritating the nurses who wouldn’t tell him a damn thing. But he’d also been too worried he would miss her if he left to get a book or something else to occupy his racing mind.

So instead, he engaged in extremely reluctant waiting, thoughts spiraling to all manner of grotesque ways the blood curse had mangled Granger’s arm.

She looked perfectly fine. More than that, surprised to find him there.

"I was waiting for you," he said. He rose from his chair, resisting every impulse to reach for her right hand and examine it. But from where he stood it looked completely normal. She flexed her fingers as he watched. Why did she still look so confused?

"But—why did you wait for me?"

A chill raced down Draco's spine, coldness that had nothing to do with Occlumency. He hadn't engaged those defenses since the healers whisked Granger away, leaving him to focus on controlling his breathing. As such, standing in front of her now, he was completely himself. This left the door open for what felt suspiciously like mortification, carried by the implication that he shouldn't have waited. Was it inappropriate? Had he overstepped?

He slid his hands in his pockets, trying to resist the urge to fiddle with his cuffs or shuffle from foot to foot. He fought the desire to request she roll up her repaired shirtsleeve and prove his family home hadn't permanently maimed her.

He cleared his throat. "You were harmed at my family's estate, Granger. It felt like appropriate decorum to ensure you were alright. I—apologize, if you'd rather I leave—"

"No." She almost reached out, at least that's what he inferred from the small jerk in her arm and shoulder, but she stopped herself. "I just—didn't expect it."

"Are you?" he asked. "Alright? That is, are you alright?"

She crossed her body with her left arm, massaging her right forearm where the curse had been just hours before. But she smiled, something reassuring, something warm.

"Oh, yes—I am. It was a pretty run-of-the-mill blood curse. I've been filtered and replenished. Good as new."

"And that's it?" It wasn't that he didn't believe her, but he wanted—needed—to make sure. His whole body practically thrummed with the desire to cross the three feet of distance between them, examine her arm, and then apologize profusely, possibly on his knees. *That* was a dangerous thought; he packed it up and put it away, a little chill.

"Yes. It's pretty straightforward, actually. I'm just a little lightheaded from all the blood they purged. Blood replenishers take time—I'm sure you know."

He did. They were an extremely common healing potion. They worked best when taken with food and drink.

“We’ll get you some food, then,” he said.

“What?” Her left arm fell back to her side; probably a side effect of the shock. Her eyes had gone wide too, huge expressive orbs practically begging him to make more sense.

He felt like he’d been perfectly clear. “Food, Granger. We should get you some strength, help that blood replenisher along. You are looking rather ghostly. Come on.”

He offered her his arm, an instinct from a different version of himself who didn’t have to consider what it might look like for Hermione Granger to walk arm in arm with Draco Malfoy.

And strangely, unbelievably, inexplicably: she took it. Admittedly, her eyes narrowed once her surprise passed, and she looked like she trusted him less than she trusted a blast ended skrewt, but she took his arm and walked with him through the hospital halls and out the doors.

He tensed. He couldn’t help it; every ounce of his self-awareness had been narrowed down to the pressure of her hand gripping his forearm and the warmth from the crook of her elbow radiating through his shirtsleeve. He didn’t comment on the wobble he felt in her steps, on how it became clear, as they stepped onto the footpath outside St. Mungo’s, that she’d benefited from his steady arm.

He tried to ask his question in as matter-of-fact way as possible; the last thing he wanted was for her to think he intended to make fun of her. His house had attacked her, for the second time, no less. He’d have to be tremendously cruel to layer casual insults on top of that. And maybe he had been at one time, but that was before he’d had casual cruelty lobbed at *him* on a regular basis. Perspective had a revelatory magic to it, he’d realized.

“How far do you think you can walk?”

Inconveniently, St. Mungo’s just happened to sit in the middle of muggle London.

“I’m—” she started. Her grip on his arm tightened, a beat, and then loosened again. Draco looked ahead, resolute in his commitment to let her have privacy in whatever battle against her limits she needed to

have. "I'm not up for walking very far."

It wasn't what she meant, but for some reason, those words had the same effect on Draco as if she'd said *I trust you with my life*. Granger had just admitted to a weakness, no matter how small, and evidently trusted him not to take advantage of that. He almost laughed at how utterly unbelievable such trust would have been mere months earlier.

Draco considered his options, which had essentially been limited to whatever was in his line of sight.

"Do you like Italian, Granger? It looks like there's a place on the corner up there."

Her grip tightened again. "It—it will be muggle," she said, voice quiet.

"Well that's—fine." He struggled with the words because he knew she wouldn't believe him, not because of the principle of the thing. Sure enough, he could see her head angling in his periphery, probably seeking confirmation that he meant what he'd said.

He turned and met her gaze. He'd expected suspicion but saw something more like wonder. He had to pack that away too, lest it double him over with an uncanny sense of satisfaction that wove between his fibrous parts that sometimes felt like they may unravel at the seams.

"It's—fine?" she asked.

"Yes. I—ah, started carrying more muggle money on me in Sarajevo. Magical spaces aren't as separate there. It, well, seemed like a smart thing to do here, too. Just in case." He reached into his trouser pocket to pull out his wand and his billfold, unshrinking it.

She might have let go of him then, if only for a moment, to make it easier for him to cast his spell and fumble with his money, but she remained firmly in place. If anything, she leaned more heavily into him. He suspected she might be struggling more than she wanted to admit.

He held out a handful of bills to show her.

"Do you think this would suffice?"

Her hand shot out to the muggle money, shoving it down. "Merlin, Malfoy. Don't—my gods, put that away. You could probably buy the

whole restaurant with all that.” She laughed, but her pitch crept towards hysteria. She swayed.

He indulged in a frown as he returned his billfold to his pocket and led them down the block.

“Oh, don’t pout, Malfoy,” she said. He could see her smiling up at him from the corner of his eye. He did not, could not, look. “Did you not pay attention while Gringotts converted your galleons? That was a *lot* of money.”

He simply raised a brow and tilted his head towards her, just enough that she’d be able to see, but not enough that he’d have to look into her eyes, not from this proximity.

She snorted a laugh, grip on his arm holding strong as he opened the door for her, leading her inside the restaurant.

—

It was sometime after the appetizer arrived that Draco experienced a complete system meltdown in what felt like a very literal sense. Even without actively engaging in Occlumency, there were still things he’d frozen out, chipped off, packed away. And those things, so diligently ignored for so long—months, probably—flew from their hiding places, molten, and rejoined the flow of blood pulsing through his veins.

It happened as he stared at their *fried zucchini blossoms*, which irritated him probably more than they should.

“Sometimes they’re stuffed with cheese, Malfoy. I’m surprised Blaise hasn’t made you try them. His family’s Italian, right? They’re delicious,” Granger had said, insisting over the rim of her wine glass.

Draco enjoyed fine things: fine food, fine wine, fine dining. And the company of fine witches. Which was where things fell apart: staring at this absolutely ridiculous appetizer, sipping the most expensive red wine available—in what happened to be a not inexpensive restaurant, according to Granger’s protests once she saw the menu—and in the company of someone he couldn’t entirely deny was a fine witch.

He was on a fucking date.

An *accidental* date.

And that thought became the key that unlocked whatever room inside his mind held all the inappropriate things he'd thought about Granger since she'd started working in his home, flooding his system with a rush of heat. Heat in embarrassed varieties, fond varieties, and *lustful* varieties, most distressingly.

All those thoughts that weren't supposed to be a problem, that he'd tried his best to ignore, that he'd packed away to deal with at a later date, roared to life inside his head, drowning out the tasteful piano track playing throughout the restaurant. Apparently *this* would be the later date, the specific time he'd finally have to manage several identity crises worth of traitorous thoughts: while staring at fried fucking zucchini blossoms.

As his eyes bored holes into the appetizer plate between them, Draco tried and failed to find a part of him that was disgusted, or upset, or otherwise revolted at the idea of being in a date-like setting with Hermione Granger. Instead, all he found was a seed of rebellious pleasure, and an internal chiding that said he couldn't take it back now, couldn't unthink it now that he'd thought it; he *wanted* to be on a date with Granger.

He almost excused himself to find a place where he could groan at his own idiocy in private, perhaps hex his own bollocks off for finding himself so deep, so suddenly, and so unwittingly. Evidently, he had a skill for self-delusion.

As it turned out, fried zucchini blossoms were delicious. He couldn't stop himself from watching Granger's mouth as she partook. She, in turn, watched him with an equal look of curiosity he couldn't place.

"You're left-handed," she said.

He paused, fork hovering midway between his plate and his mouth.

"I am," he said, lowering his fork and ignoring his bite.

"I haven't noticed before."

He tilted his head: face warm, and he wished it was from the cabernet.

"You've seen me cast plenty of magic for—years."

She shrugged, sipping her wine. She glanced at his left hand again,

resting near his plate, still loosely holding his fork. He felt the weight of her gaze as her focus travelled up his arm, snagging on his forearm, at the thing they both knew lived beneath his sleeve, before continuing upwards: bicep to shoulder to collar to—finally—his face.

“I just never noticed.” She almost sounded surprised by her own admission.

“I suppose I don’t know why you would.”

When, exactly, had Granger gotten pretty? He’d noticed before that she’d changed since school, but he hadn’t connected those changes to the face in front of him: open and warm and glowing from the candlelight at the center of their table. Flickers of light danced across her freckles, illuminating them not unlike the stars in the sky. He wanted to reach out and trace every path between them: draw constellations on her skin.

Oh, he was so very fucked.

He’d never come anywhere close to thinking those kinds of thoughts about Astoria. In fact, he’d stayed the length of several Quidditch pitches away from that line of thinking, despite all his opportunities at the many luncheons and dinners and social events he’d escorted her to.

His conversation with Granger stalled in a shockingly similar way to all of his attempted outings with his betrothed: swirling in an eddy of awkward glances before traveling downstream, towards the waterfall where one of them would have to jump.

The only question Draco wanted to ask, the only conversation he really wanted to have was entirely inappropriate and far too date-like for his denial, or lack thereof, to stomach.

He was dying to know why she and Weasley had broken up. When he’d first learned that fact, months ago during Theo’s birthday, Draco had packed the stemming questions away so quickly it was a miracle he’d had any control over his occlusion, particularly with alcohol involved.

His other, absolutely-not-date-related, go-to conversation topic was work. Which wasn’t an option, owing to the fact that he probably knew more about her work than anyone else in her life. He had the distinct pleasure of witnessing it, after all. So, that topic toppled off the fucking table.

He glared at the zucchini blossoms.

He could ask her what she liked to do in her spare time.

Except she'd already admitted once that she had very little of that since she spent so much time on her work. Also, that would have been an absolutely pathetic not-date conversation starter.

He revised his desire to be excused; he would also require privacy to throw himself off the tallest building he could find. It was as if he'd never been on a date before, never spoken to this witch in his entire life. He might have shaken himself if not for the fact that Granger's impossibly expressive eyes were currently fixed on him with curiosity. This was *not* a date, nor could he think of it as one.

This was dinner designed for her wellbeing. She needed food to aid her blood replenishing potions and, because she'd been harmed in his home, he felt a responsibility for her care.

"How are you feeling?" he asked, finally taking the long-abandoned bite of his appetizer.

"Better," she said. "The food is helping. I'm feeling a little less woozy. So, thank you. This was a good idea."

She lifted her wine glass, pausing just before the glass touched her lips. Draco found himself envious of a curved rim of glass, so close to her mouth as she spoke.

"The wine might not have been the most medically advisable choice," she continued. "But it's been a long day."

He lifted his own glass. "I do have good ideas sometimes."

She laughed. "Did you just make use of understatement, Draco Malfoy?"

He might have. But his brain had stalled, utterly *confunded*, at the sound of his given name spoken so easily from her lips. For the second time that day, in fact. More than that, she'd been teasing him. It felt like a spark of fire in his chest, catching on nerves and veins and entire muscle groups, building to a conflagration at his fingertips.

He cleared his throat.

"Why dark artifacts?" he asked.

She looked up from where she'd been tracing patterns against the white tablecloth, apparently not immune from the novelty of their situation, either.

"Oh, well—I just," she flustered, blush blooming behind freckles. She released a sigh and settled her hands on the table, tone shifting. "I was stuck—felt stuck. Stuck in the Magical Creatures Department, stuck with—Ron, too. A lot of things weren't working quite how I wanted them to. When I ended things with Ron"—Draco logged that fact with the force of a sledgehammer inside his skull—"I realized I wanted to have a more immediate effect with my work. This fit."

"And you enjoy it?"

Of all the stupid, idiotic, imbecilic questions he could have asked. He went with the one where he inquired as to whether or not she enjoyed her work, stuck in the manor where she'd once been tortured and now subsequently injured mere hours before.

"Very much."

He might have choked on his wine if he'd been sipping it.

"Oh," he said, disbelief slipping from his mouth before he could stop it.

Their meals arrived: hers, a creamy saffron risotto, and his, a lamb dish in a burgundy sauce. With fresh plates in front of them and dashes of awkward conversation behind them, the looming label of *date* reasserted itself.

They ate mostly in silence, a few stunted attempts at marveling over their delicious food. Until finally, Granger came up with something else.

"Why did you decide to move out of the manor?"

He finished slicing his cut of lamb and set his fork and knife down, offering her his undivided attention.

"I'd gotten used to living on my own. While I was abroad I—" he stopped, grimaced, and restarted. "That's not—I'm sorry. That's not entirely true. I just couldn't live there anymore. Not with everything that's happened."

He expected to feel flayed, exposed by such honesty. But instead, it

felt a lot like gasping for air, breaking the surface in a pool of water after being held under for far too long.

“Being abroad,” he continued. “It was good for me.” And he tried to will her to understand just how good. How he’d finally been able to be someone unrelated to his family legacy. How, from the moment he arrived, he pretended like blood purity meant nothing to him, a belief already severely fractured by the things he’d seen and done and agonized over during the war and his two years under house arrest.

And how, at some point, he stopped having to pretend. And it had been a marvelous feeling.

“And now you’re back,” she said, perhaps seeing his point, perhaps not.

“I am.”

“And you’re engaged.”

The crescendo towards feeling like he might finally reveal himself clattered a measure too early, banging around inside his head: off-key, off-tempo, off-topic.

“I’m—betrothed.”

“Is that different?” she asked. Her tone had taken on a sharp quality, no longer quite as warm, quite as welcoming.

He shouldn’t say it. He didn’t want to say it.

But he said anyway, gods be damned.

“It’s different to me.”

Chapter End Notes

thank you so SO much to everyone who is reading and commenting and chatting with me on tumblr and on discord. y'all are honestly the greatest and getting to see your reactions to this story is one of the best parts of my week! i absolutely adore all of you, thank you so much for reading and commenting and being generally enthusiastic with me!!

you probably aren't surprised at this point to hear how many thanks i owe [icepower55](#), [Endless_musings](#), and [persephone_stone](#) for their beta prowesses. with some additional love to

endless_musings, without whom, we would not have landed on
fried zucchini blossoms as the star of this chapter xD

Chapter 9: -2.416, -2.500, -2.583

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

September

tock

After the incident with the blood curse, Granger elected to leave the guest wing for another time. Not because she couldn't handle it—she'd made a point to inform Draco of that fact—but more because she couldn't bear his redoubled hovering after her unfortunate injury that first day.

"Accidents happen, Draco," she'd insisted with a huff, gesturing for him to step back. Admittedly, he'd been lingering rather close, watching as she contemplated which room she might try and enter. "It's an expected part of this job. I've been trained to handle these sorts of things." A pause, a sigh. "Would it ease your concerns if I tackled a different hall instead?"

"I'm not concerned."

She rolled her eyes. "Obviously not."

But she'd abandoned the idea of returning to the guest wing after that. Instead, she moved back to the library, working her way through the adjacent corridor. While Draco made a concerted effort not to hover too closely behind, he still couldn't quite shake his unease as he lounged on a settee in the hallway while she worked in one of the many flanking rooms.

He winced, shifting against his shirt fabric; the placket rubbed uncomfortably against a new burn on his chest where a recent attempt at cursed scar removal had failed spectacularly. He crossed moon dew off his list of possible ingredients with excessive vigor, quill tip ripping the parchment as his face contorted, a sharp inhale at a stab of pain.

Considering different ingredient combinations had become Draco's preferred distraction technique as Granger worked her way through

the corridor adjacent to the library and then started on the second floor. He trailed her, book and parchment in hand, reading and scribbling, contemplating his options, and dodging her curious questions about what had him so enthralled.

It became a helpful method of avoiding his worries that something else in his home might attack her, and more than that, from thinking too long about the unfortunate not-date they'd shared the month before.

He sighed as a shadow stole the sunlight filtering through the enormous floor-to-ceiling window next to his settee, aggravating his reading process. He paused, looking up as he realized what room Granger stood in front of. He'd been dreading this.

He spoke just as she directed one of her diagnostic runes to the wood panelling on the door, letting it sink in: purple.

"While I can't speak for the other rooms in the manor," he said. "I can assure you there's nothing of interest to you in there."

In a made-up, imaginary world, Granger would have taken that at face value, perhaps thanked him for saving her some precious time, and moved to the next room.

That imaginary world did not know of Granger's impossible curiosity and unending stubbornness.

She turned towards him, narrowing her eyes as she tapped her wand against her thigh. She engaged in an excellent impression of a Legilimens trying to see right through him.

He could have tried harder, could have tried to stop her with real effort. Instead, he sighed, setting his book and parchment on the window sill and stood. He stepped forward and dismantled the wards for her. It wasn't difficult; they belonged to him, after all.

From his periphery, he saw her gaze shifting from the door, to his face, and back again. He let the door swing open, already resisting the tug of awkwardness he knew would follow.

"This is my bedroom." He stepped inside, opting to ignore the tiny intake of breath he heard from behind him. He braced himself for the backwards reality where Hermione Granger was alone with him in his bedroom. The potential ease of Occlumency called to him like a siren song. But he could do this, survive without it. He didn't want every

interaction with Granger to result in him hiding behind mental magic.

She entered, head swiveling to take in his bookshelves, plenty and packed, his desk, his four poster—suspiciously similar to those provided at Hogwarts, though substantially larger—the telescope by the window, the small sitting area in the corner, the door to his private facilities, and with a turn, glancing back at the threshold she'd just crossed.

He leaned against the corner of his desk, letting the pointed edge dig into the back of his thigh, a distraction from imagining several other scenarios where they might have ended up in this room together—each new vision as impossible as the last.

“You—still have furniture here? I thought you'd moved out.”

That helped distract him from a particularly errant fantasy about what Granger might look like pressed against the door frame behind her—*Merlin*, he had to stop.

“I did move out.”

Her eyes widened as if she'd realized something obvious.

“So, you must have just—bought all new furniture, then. Of course.”

Draco frowned, finally distracted in full from his increasingly libidinous train of thoughts. “No—I didn't *buy* my furniture, Granger.”

She quirked her head, lips twisted between amusement and confusion.

“Why did you say that like it was something—I don't know. Wildly offensive?”

“Because I don't have to *buy* my furniture.”

She smiled like he'd said something funny. “See, you did it again. What's so offensive about buying your furniture?”

He leaned harder against the corner of the desk, denting the muscle in the back of his leg. He realized his mistake only a second before he saw the light of recognition cross her face. He'd been caught being an aristocratic arse, and he hadn't even noticed.

“We don't”—it took concentrated effort not to cringe at how he was about to sound—“buy furniture. It's inherited. We have plenty in storage. I furnished my flat from that. I only took a few pieces from

the manor—the green sofa, for example. Buying one’s furniture is so...”

“Working class?”

He blanched. She outright laughed, doubling over, amusement spilling in gasps. Draco was fairly certain the corner of his desk had made contact with his femur, piercing through skin and muscle.

As uncomfortable as such exposure made him feel, he appreciated the opportunity to marvel at Granger’s laugh: a true, unguarded sound. It shined like sunlight, coasting across his skin with the softness of silk.

Granger straightened, wiping a tear from the corner of her eye.

“I don’t really know how,” she started, a smile pulling the apples of her cheeks into a flushed, round shape. He hated how lovely it made her look. “But I sometimes forget how obscenely wealthy you are. Which is hilarious, considering I literally spend all day traipsing around your mansion.”

“You hardly traipse.”

She giggled, and the sound of it danced around the room. He wondered, briefly, if such a sound had ever existed in this place before she breathed that noise into existence.

“Well. I can assure you. Of all my family’s beliefs, our views on furniture are the least problematic.”

She sobered, the pitch of her laughter falling, fading into steady breaths. She pulled out her wand and cast her diagnostic runes, offering him a sad smile as she did.

“I believe you.”

He wasn’t sure what she meant. He didn’t have the courage to ask.

He pulled away from the edge of the desk, leg protesting in pain as blood rushed to the muscle he’d crushed. He watched the series of mostly purple runes hovering in front of her. Three outlying runes, two red and one yellow, disputed his earlier assessment that there would be nothing of interest in here. Disappointment sank inside him; he’d been sure he’d kept this room, this place, separate from so much of the darkness that permeated the manor.

Granger held her wand to the single yellow rune, prodding it towards the desk where he stood. For a breathless moment, he thought she might direct it to his chest again. He worried about the state of his scars, in various stages of healing from the experimental torment he'd put them through.

She passed by him instead, lowering the rune to a drawer on the far side. She opened it with a quick spell, levitating a fancy eagle feather quill from inside. She pressed the yellow rune into it, watching as it glowed, evidently learning something from the process.

"Ah—that was a gift from Goyle a few Christmases ago. Haven't used it," Draco said, watching as she worked, muttering something and pulling her yellow rune back out of it. She recast her diagnostics: almost all purple, excepting for the two red runes.

"I'm surprised about the red ones," he said.

Granger smiled sadly. "I'm not." She gestured between them with her off hand. "It's you and me."

Draco felt fear drop hot in his stomach, and he almost gave into the instinct to freeze it out. But in his room, perfectly safe with Granger, he didn't want to.

"How does it work?" he asked. "Those spells of yours. They seem—complex."

She hovered her wand at one of the red runes, just as she'd done months before, in the library when she first touched him with this magic.

"I should have asked, last time—I just performed magic on you without your permission. It was presumptuous."

"You can do it now—if you want." His voice had dropped. They stood close together; they didn't need volume to communicate. Any worries he'd had about the state of his scars had completely evaporated from his mind, burned up by the morning sun, by the warmth behind Granger's eyes, blazing with curiosity.

She gestured the rune closer, letting it sink against his chest. It disappeared. The tint of the room dipped, strangely cool in the absence of red light. It only took another blink for the glow to reappear, tracing the scars along his torso and neck.

“It was developed by the Department of Mysteries. It’s a combination of arithmancy, ancient runes, and some powerful cleansing charms. The flashy part is the glowing runes, helps me identify where pockets of dark magic are hiding, how severe they are.”

“But how do you—how do you know? You just walk around, following the runes. It’s—” *otherworldly, ethereal, unreal* “—interesting.”

“It’s a lot of intuitive magic. It took me—well, it took me quite a while to get the hang of it. Intuition isn’t my forte.”

Draco made a humming sound, agreeing, but not so strongly as to annoy her. Too enthusiastic an agreement that Granger needed rules, order, boundaries, and specific incantations to feel in control felt like asking for a hexing.

He pressed his hand to one of the glowing red lines beneath his shirt—evidence of his scars—running along the left side of his ribcage. When the idea struck, it nearly crushed him under its weight.

“Does it work on people? You and me? Can you not—use this to take the dark magic out of our scars?” Perhaps he’d spoken too quickly, with too much enthusiasm, with too much raw hope.

Because when he looked away from his scars and back at Granger, her eyes had gone glassy. A sad smile decorated her face, fading quickly despite what looked like intense effort to maintain the facade.

“No. It doesn’t work on living things. Pulling dark magic out of something that can’t be hurt by the process is one thing. Pulling it from something animate...” she lifted a hand, reached out, close to touching the glowing scar peeking out from his collar, but stopped. “The most it can do is identify dark magic living in our scars, nothing more.”

It wasn’t the answer he wanted, but it was enough of a start. Maybe if she’d be willing to teach him the spell, he could experiment with it, try to find a way to bind it with his potion or otherwise leverage it for his uses. He closed his eyes, blocking out the glowing runes in front of him and the scars still illuminated on his chest. His mind raced, considering the new possibilities. How had he not thought of it before?

“Are you okay?” Granger asked. He opened his eyes again; she stood even closer, within a single step of him. She’d canceled the glowing

runes, leaving the space between them unnaturally deep and dark and cavernous. With the right impetus, he could see them disappearing inside such quiet, dark caverns. “I had a similar thought when I first learned about it, too.”

She rubbed at her left forearm, hidden beneath her cardigan.

She looked so earnest, so concerned for his emotional wellbeing, and he didn’t deserve such a thing. Not in the slightest. He felt something crumble in his chest, belatedly comprehending her words and grieving for the fact that she had wondered it, too.

All the more incentive to figure out a potion that actually worked and didn’t just leave patches of raw, irritated scar tissue behind, just as cursed as it had been before.

In the meantime—

Fuck.

The impulse to kiss Granger, the absolutely overwhelming compulsion towards it, reached out from the floorboards and nearly shook his senses from him. He wanted to kiss her. He wanted to kiss *Hermione Granger*. Badly. And with that thought came the reluctant admission that he wasn’t even a little bit annoyed at their accidental not-date the month before. In fact, he’d enjoyed every minute of it: awkward, stunted minutes included. Because Granger was interesting. And so fucking compassionate. And brilliant. And standing *right there* looking oh-so-kissable, if only he leaned forward, stooped down and met her lips with his own.

“My birthday is next week,” she said, staring up at him with a sort of open-mouthed awe he knew she must have seen reflected back at her. The oxygen in the room thickened, weighing him down, wearing him out. Whatever threads of self-control he had left were slowly being compressed, strung out.

And she’d chosen to break the tension with her birthday?

“Happy early birthday?”

Perhaps Draco’s brain had been compressed as well, smashed to pulp from the roar of blood rushing through his skull. *Happy early birthday?* Where was a rogue *avada* when he needed one?

“I’m not really celebrating,” she said, tucking a lock of curls behind

her right ear. He would pay a substantial number of galleons to do the same, to touch that curl, to wind it around his fingers and see how it felt. “I’m just going for some drinks at the Leaky, probably.”

“Well, that should be fun.” Draco’s brain had ground to a halt inside his head. Was she asking him to come? He couldn’t tell. And he didn’t know if he wanted her to.

Fuck, he wanted her to.

“Harry and Ginny—Ron, and everyone, well, they know I’m working with you.”

“Right.”

“They know you’re not—that you’re different than you were. I’ve told them.”

He made a noise, caught between agreement and confirmation he still had control over the use of his lungs.

She looked up at him, still standing so close.

He looked down at her, still incapable of beheading those treasonous thoughts about kissing her running rampant through his brain.

She didn’t ask.

He didn’t prompt.

The staggering inappropriateness of their present situation struck him like a bludger to the gut. They were in his bedroom. She hadn’t been doing actual work for what felt like several eternities. And, just in case he’d already forgotten, they were in his *fucking* bedroom.

He didn’t want her to ask it. She shouldn’t ask it. If she asked, he wasn’t going to be able to say no.

“If you wanted to come by...”

“Yeah, alright.”

Draco spent the better part of that week regretting those two words of agreement: *yeah, alright*. They didn't even sound like him. They sounded like something Weasley would say: slightly idiotic, a little dim. What had he even been thinking? Clearly he hadn't been. No scenario existed wherein Draco Malfoy could have a normal pub night with the golden trio, which was essentially what Granger's invitation boiled down to.

Either Potter or Weasley—or both—would hex him on sight, or they'd bicker until Granger ripped all her hair out by the roots and never spoke to him again.

Or maybe Draco would lose his temper first. Perhaps he'd send a jelly-legs jinx at the boy who lived and could then sustain himself on that image for the rest of his life. Honestly, the idea had its merits.

It became increasingly obvious throughout the afternoon of Granger's birthday, as he tried and failed to act normal around her—which mostly meant reading about experimental potions and ignoring her as she worked—that Occlumency, much as he wished he could avoid it, would be his only option to survive the night.

Towards the end of the workday, he slipped away to find a pain potion so that he might preempt his inevitable headache. He'd require a heavy dose of Occlumency if he was expected to socialize with Ronald Weasley for an extended period of time.

He met with Granger in the parlor, pain potion coursing through his system, gift in his hand.

He held it out to her. "Happy Birthday, Granger."

She looked surprised, brows lifting as she took the book-shaped package.

"So, you've remembered?" she asked. "I couldn't tell with all that brooding and ignoring me you've been doing all day."

"I wasn't brooding."

She laughed, tearing at the paper to her gift. She paused, staring down at the still mostly wrapped book. She looked back up at him. Draco resisted the urge to look away, to occlude. But he'd be doing plenty of that later. He could survive a simple gift giving without having to freeze out every last errant emotion, even the frustratingly fond ones. He did rather like that little look of surprise on her face: lips parted,

eyes wide, a slight blush warming her skin.

“You’re not giving me this,” she said.

“I believe I just did.”

“Draco—it’s. This is practically priceless.”

“You needn’t qualify. I’m certain it’s *actually* priceless.”

He watched her grip on the gift wrap tighten. “I can’t accept it.”

“Of course you can. Didn’t you tell me *Hogwarts: A History* is your favorite book?”

“Favorite nonfiction book, yes—but that doesn’t mean you should be giving me your family’s priceless first edition of it.” Her voice pitched higher, the first sign of panic creeping in.

He’d expected a little resistance. He hadn’t expected her to look so terrified of the thing.

“Granger.” He took a step forward and pulled the book from her grip. He almost smiled at the resistance he met, a slight reluctance to let it go. He ripped away the rest of the wrapping and gave it back to her. “I sincerely doubt anyone other than you and I even know this book exists. Furthermore, I am certain that you and I are the only people who appreciate it. And I want you to have it.”

She looked down at the book in her hands. It looked comically big in her grip: a huge tome in little hands. He watched as her front teeth sank into the flesh of her bottom lip, pressure turning it white from lack of blood. He realized that if he was close enough to see such a thing, he should probably take a step away. But he didn’t move, waiting for the moment she released her lip, knowing it would flush the prettiest shade of pink.

He’d lost his gods damned mind.

He stepped back.

“Come on, Granger. Pop it in that impressively spacious bag of yours and let’s get this over with.”

That seemed to snap her out of her staring contest with the book she so clearly coveted.

“I’ll buy another one if I miss it terribly,” he assured her. She narrowed her eyes at him, and he enjoyed the thrill of watching her try to decide if he’d been serious or not.

She took another moment to consider before sighing, a long-suffering kind of sigh that Pansy Parkinson would have been oh-so-proud of. She opened her little beaded bag and carefully added the book to whatever monstrous collection lived inside that undetectable extension charm that he’d been tactful enough not to point out.

—

Arriving at the Leaky Cauldron with the intention of meeting up with Harry Potter, at least two Weasleys, and an unknown number of extraneous Gryffindors, felt like an out of body experience. Doing so with Hermione Granger as his unofficial guide felt downright dreamlike.

Granger spotted Potter several seconds after Draco had already found him tucked away in the far corner of the pub—a lifetime of picking Potter out of a crowd apparently didn’t stop being a skill when it went unused for several years. He’d have one drink. He’d fulfill his obligation to come and socialize because Granger had told her friends that Draco wasn’t *that bad* anymore, or something to that effect.

Granger waved. Draco tried not to sneer when he made eye contact with Weasley.

He was betrothed. This was a friendly birthday outing. This was not inappropriate. This was not uncomfortable. He could do this.

He’d been about to excuse himself to get his single drink and sink into his Occlumency when Granger pulled him forward and tugged him through a maze of tables and chairs, stopping them in front of a large booth containing Harry Potter, Ron Weasley, Ginny Weasley, and Neville Longbottom. Every set of eyes at the table, and what felt like the rest of the room, stared at Draco. He could feel Granger looking up at him, too, from where she stood by his side.

Potter was the first to move, standing from the booth and offering Granger a hug. No one else moved, least of all Draco, who felt a little bit like he’d walked into some kind of trap. Absurdly, he wondered if

he didn't move, didn't speak, didn't breathe, he might be able to avoid springing it.

Then Ginny Weasley sprang it for him.

"Evening, Ferret."

"Pleasure, She-Weasel."

He heard Granger's little intake of breath beside him, nearly as crushing as the force of awkwardness trying to suffocate them all. He froze it out, sank into his Occlumency, and slid into the booth next to Longbottom, as neutral a party as he was going to find. In the fog of his mental wards, Draco realized they'd intentionally left that seat open: poor Longbottom had the honor of being neutral territory.

At some point, Draco finally got his drink. And eventually got roped into a second. He engaged in neutral, barely coherent conversation, occluding himself into such a fog that not even Ron Weasley's inability to hold his liquor—face growing red, limbs growing sloppy—was enough to pull Draco to the surface to engage in an insult or two. Nor did Potter's ever-suspicious glare convince him to snap or sneer.

Draco said something about Herbology to Longbottom.

"Well, the Sneezewort yields have been finicky with us having such a warm summer, you know?" Longbottom said, taking a sip of his butterbeer.

Draco did not know. He didn't remember what he'd said to elicit an assessment of Sneezewort crops. So he just nodded, sipping his own drink in turn. He felt the weaslette's eyes on him with about as much subtlety as a *bombarda*. He refused to look in her direction.

He dipped into a calm, placid pool of conversation topics and picked one for Longbottom: voice level and listless as he did. "Are you enjoying teaching at Hogwarts?"

Longbottom said something. Draco didn't pay attention.

This time he felt Granger's eyes on him. Her thigh pressed up against his as he sat sandwiched between her and Longbottom, unfortunately central in the booth. Her gaze irritated his temples; he packed that up and flaked it away, too. He should have banished the creeping warmth running along the side of his leg where she sat flush against him, but for reasons he refused to acknowledge, he let those treacherous

feelings slide.

When he'd drained his drink, he had Granger let him out of the booth. He offered a series of lifeless goodbyes and left, opting for a walk through Diagon Alley as he pulled back his Occlumency. Flooding while heavily occluded felt like asking for the headache he'd been trying so hard to avoid.

He focused on the cool autumn air, pulling the ice from his mind and to the surface of his skin, reassembling the discarded parts of himself he'd chipped away in order to survive a social gathering with Harry Potter and the like.

"Draco."

He turned. Granger had followed him onto the cobbled street, clutching a butterbeer; her third of the evening by his count.

"You're really leaving?" she asked, a slight unsteadiness to her step as she shifted her weight from foot to foot. The soft glow of the streetlamp amplified the flush creeping up her neck, though whether that coloring came from drinking or something else, Draco couldn't tell.

"I am."

He held tight to the fragments of his Occlumency he'd yet to dismantle.

"Why? You've barely said a word since you arrived." She took a step forward, then three more in rapid succession, marching herself into his personal space. She seemed only to remember the drink in her hand when she stopped, grimacing as the golden froth sloshed over the rim and dripped onto her hand. Undeterred, she stared up at him and made a triumphant sound. "You're occluding. You have been all night, haven't you?"

"I appreciate the invitation, Granger. It was very kind of you to include me with your friends, but—I don't fit in with them. I don't want to ruin anything. Wouldn't you like to have a pleasant birthday?"

"Kind of me?"

She rolled her eyes and took a sip of her drink. Draco reached for her elbow, pulling her gently to the side so as to make room for a passing

couple.

“Draco, you are one of my friends.”

For the first time, it occurred to him that she'd been using his first name. For how long? The whole day? The week? He couldn't recall. But it was that use, in conjunction with the assertion that he was her friend, that struck him.

She kept talking, chatty from the alcohol. “I've probably spent more time with you in the last eight months than I have with Harry, Ginny, and Ron combined.”

“I'm—I'm not your friend.” What might have sounded mean, sounded cruel as a straightforward statement, mostly came out confused, disappointed.

“Yes, you are. And quit occluding. You don't have to. We're just having some drinks. They've all promised to behave.”

“You didn't make me promise to behave.”

“Because I knew you would.”

He had to physically step away from her. That level of trust, that was too much. She had no reason to even remotely believe so highly of him.

“Hermione.” Had he ever called her by her name before? “We're not—we can't be friends. I wouldn't be a good friend for you.”

Primarily because he kept forgetting who he was, who she was, and who he was meant to marry more often than not in her presence. Especially when she had her thigh pressed up against the side of his leg. His focus had gone into rapid decay, a planet nearing a black hole, torn further and further to shreds with each revolution.

She frowned, taking her own step away from him, back towards the Leaky.

“Well, that's fine. I'm a good enough friend for the both of us,” she said, tucking a mass of curls behind her ear. “I'm fine with waiting until you sort yourself out.”

She turned and left, disappearing inside the pub before Draco could fully register what she'd said, or more, what she'd meant. He let the

rest of his Occlumency fall, heat rushing him, doing battle with the chill in the air.

He couldn't decide if he was more stunned or impressed. He nearly walked back into the Leaky, just to follow the pull of her, daring him to do it.

—

When Draco finally stepped through the Floo, a Malfoy eagle owl waited at one of the windows to his flat, perched on the tiny sill and *tap tap tapping* with its beak.

It was only as he offered the bird a treat and sent it away that Draco realized what its presence meant; his parents had figured out he'd left the manor. He groaned, breaking the wax seal he recognized from his father's office, fully prepared for a written lambasting.

Instead, he found something startlingly like a business proposal. Or rather, a very taciturn notice that Lucius had transferred management of one of the family investment accounts into Draco's name. It required his signature to complete.

Draco stared at it, trying to make sense of the sudden gift of responsibility, of inclusion, in something he'd been frozen out of for the entirety of his life. It looked like an olive branch but felt like a trap.

He poured himself a drink, sat on the green velvet sofa in his living room—with only a brief thought to Hermione's protests that perhaps they ought to consider a custody arrangement over it—and stared at the letter from his father sitting innocently, too innocently, on the table in front of him. Suspicion, exhaustion, and hope warred inside him: a fight to the death, most likely.

He'd spent years in a stalemate with his father. Living under house arrest together had pushed them from disagreements to disappointments to simple avoidance, mutual and permanent. At least, Draco had assumed the permanence.

It didn't make sense. It didn't feel right. His stomach churned, and likely not from his extended use of Occlumency that evening.

Something else unsettled him. He tensed at the sound of a clock chiming. He counted, barely nine in the evening, and he felt utterly wrung out. As the reverberations from the chime faded, a small thought surfaced in Draco's mind.

He and Theo had toyed with time. They'd changed one small series of events involving his father. He'd only thought of the turner in passing over the past few months, never really lending any credence to the potential implications of changing the trajectory of time. And he'd almost completely forgotten the original version of events from that day: where Draco had not been included in Granger's initial arrival, where there'd been no interruption, no lecture, none of it at all. He wondered which piece, if any of it, set into motion a version of reality where Lucius offered Draco more authority in the family affairs.

He groaned, leaning his head back against the sofa. Or maybe none of it. Maybe this would have happened regardless, and the things he and Theo did or did not change had absolutely no impact.

His head hurt.

All Draco knew was that he'd sought his father's acceptance for so long that even this small showing of faith felt like belonging, more so than he cared to admit. *Gods* he wanted to belong, to something, to someone, to fucking anything. The business opportunity tempted him, wildly so. But to accept it would mean accepting more of Lucius Malfoy into his life.

He'd thought it was best to cut himself out entirely. He'd left and studied abroad; he'd bought his own flat when he came back. He'd tried to excise the rotten flesh, slash and burn the crops, amputate the dead limb. But he still felt the phantom pains from time to time; a piece of parchment held the cure.

He set his empty glass down on the table and summoned a quill. If his father was willing to try, Draco could as well. He signed the document, waiting for a rush of adrenaline to give feeling to what should have been excitement: finally a participant in the Malfoy family investments. Finally in control of an account. Finally trusted to carry on part of the family legacy.

But he only felt more phantom pains, remembrance of a limb he'd already abandoned. And he wondered if that meant it was too late.

The clock chimed again. An hour had passed in a moment.

Chapter End Notes

i realize i sound like a broken record but i really can't possibly thank you all enough for reading and commenting and kudos'ing and hanging out with me on tumblr and discord! this story has been such a joy to share so far and seeing your reactions truly makes my day! i'm so, so sorry i haven't had the time to reply to comments in the last couple of chapters, but please know that I read every single one and they bring me more joy than i know how to explain!

so many additional thanks to team beta: [icepower55](#), [Endless_musings](#), and [persephone_stone](#). without them, this story would have way more errors than just the zucchini vs. cougette gaff. which, by the way, if you want to witness me truly losing my mind over a vegetable, you should really be following me on tumblr.

Chapter 10: -2.333, -2.416, -2.500

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

October

tick

Some days, Draco could almost convince himself that he'd been honest about his inability to be a good friend to Granger. Most of the time, though, he spent his days watching her work and contemplating the impressive depths of his denial, while trying to ignore the knowing looks she kept sending his way: the smug smiles that said *you'll figure it out* or *I don't mind waiting*. But he couldn't figure her out. He couldn't comprehend what had her so convinced, so disarmingly certain, that they were—or could be—friends.

Tempting as it was to flake that thought away, pack it up, and silence it with a heavy dose of Occlumency, Draco forced himself to admit that a large part of his inability to be friends with Granger hinged on the fact that he didn't want to be *just* friends.

He certainly wasn't in the habit of wanking to the image of his friend's pretty pink lips during his morning shower. That seemed like something else entirely, ripped from the hiding places in his head he'd once kept at bay with self-delusion.

He hated those moments of weakness, increasing in frequency as they were, but he savored the raw dose of desire summoned by the image of Granger's wild curls or her lips or her smattering of freckles when he allowed himself a fantasy. And afterwards, he'd remember shiny dark brown hair, delicate bones, and blue eyes, stomach turning at how vile he'd become.

The longer he tried to pretend he and Granger couldn't really be friends, the easier it became for his subconscious to push back, laying out an extensive argument in favor of their continued association. Traitorous fucking subconscious; Draco knew excuses towards friendship would be nothing but a slippery slope towards justifying something more.

“You’re occluding today,” she said offhandedly as she walked by, already unwarding and letting herself into a new room for decommissioning.

He’d been reviewing notes on his latest experiments, still struggling to successfully draw dark magic from flesh without damaging it. He had several places on his chest that throbbed in testimony to his most recent failures. He sat on a transfigured chaise in the hallway, hardly noticing as Granger came and went from room to room, making quick work of a relatively unused wing in the manor.

She always seemed to know just how much she could push, never too much, but holding him accountable to whatever standard had become their normal operating procedure. He’d been occluding for several days, numbing errant memories of her looking up at him under the soft streetlights in Diagon Alley, trying to force away the all-consuming *want* to be accepted into her life. She’d allowed him a few days of his mood, and now, she brought it up.

Before he’d tried occlusion, returning to his cold, numb ally, he simply tried to focus his thoughts on the reasons why they couldn’t *really* be friends. The drawing room usually came to mind. Horrific memories of her screams, images of her torture. Draco couldn’t ignore or forget that his home, his family, had been so integrally tied to the movement that tried to ruin her. The first and most obvious reason why they couldn’t, shouldn’t, be friends: any association with him would be but a reintroduction of a disease she’d already survived.

His grandfather Abraxas had died of Dragon Pox. The bout that finally killed him wasn’t his first experience with the disease. He’d had it once, years before, and survived. But upon a second infection, the magic in the disease behaved differently. It looked different, acted different, but still ravaged him all the same. It had been his undoing; a patriarch brought low, broken by a thing they could not see and could not fight.

Draco flipped to another section of his notes: a series of numbers, a tiny running ledger for the account he’d been given control over, a trading venture in only semi-legal potions ingredients. The type of account had either been a lucky coincidence on his father’s behalf, or a thoughtful attempt at reconciliation. Draco hadn’t asked. The only time he’d considered it, over breakfast the morning after Granger’s birthday, he’d realized just as quickly that he didn’t want to know.

Like many parts of his relationship with Lucius: having to sift through

motive and intent and implication made it difficult to accept any good deed at face value. The risk of disappointment that Lucius hadn't cared—or known—what he'd offered, made not knowing—and therefore not risking disappointment—a reasonable option.

Draco opted to live in ignorance, knowing he'd picked a coward's choice.

Granger exited the room he would have sworn she'd unwarded mere minutes before. A flush of pink crawled up her neck. Her chest rose and fell with quick breathing, but she looked calm, shutting the door behind her.

She smirked at him, back pressed against the door, and then let out a small giggle.

"Just a rather angry armoire. Nothing too challenging. Might have tried to eat me"—she giggled again, hand coming up to cover her mouth like she might smother the sound—"but it's fine. I don't think it could actually eat me, just flapped its drawers quite a bit."

She shook her head and pushed off the door, looking far too amused for someone who'd just battled a piece of furniture. She almost looked like she was enjoying herself.

And that was reason two, and three, and all the rest why they couldn't be friends; Granger was interesting, and fun, and brilliant, and giggled about an armoire trying to eat her, and sighed about piano keys biting her. She gasped over old, rare books, and was a chatty, flirty drunk. She became fast friends with Theo and tried to reintroduce Draco to her own friends in kind. She returned his wand. She fixed his grandfather's pocket watch. She liked apple caramel ice cream and had freckles he could trace into constellations sprawling across her face. And she was kind. She was forgiving. She'd stared down the memory of Bellatrix Lestrange in the place where she'd been tortured. She didn't care about the slur carved on her arm but covered it anyway; he knew she did that for him. He didn't deserve any of it.

But he would give her the choice to remove her scar if she wanted to because, fuck it all, he wanted to be her friend. He wanted to be her friend and so much more.

Draco couldn't stand the Occlumency anymore. He tried, but his head ached and his stomach twisted, clenched and churning. Preemptive pain potions had lost their efficacy, and even though he'd known that inevitably would eventually strike, he kept turning to his mental wards for protection from everything he wasn't allowed to think or feel about Granger. He hated that he kept coming back to Occlumency: a broken second hand on a clock that could tick forward just enough to feel like it had counted time, only to be pulled back down by gravity, exactly where it started from.

He excused himself from his supervisory capacities later that afternoon, incapable of staunching the arterial flow of fantasies about Granger. Always Granger, taking up so much space inside his head.

She looked confused when he said he'd be leaving her to finish on her own, but didn't comment. He saw the quick narrowing of her eyes, assessing his own, searching for the occlusion he'd already numbed himself with. She looked disappointed, but not altogether surprised, by what she found.

He didn't exactly run through the manor halls, but his walk could certainly be deemed brisk. His head throbbed as he pulled back his mental wards, letting heat flood his veins. He'd grown accustomed to the icy stillness of it. The sudden surge of emotion in his veins nearly scorched him, burning him from the inside out. He'd already undone several buttons of his shirt by the time he stepped into the gardens, intent on escaping to the greenhouses to check on his many and varied potions ingredients for experimentation.

A drizzle of rain greeted him. He paused at the door and raised his arm, letting the rain splatter on his outstretched hand. He half expected to hear a hiss, to see the droplets evaporate into steam and sizzle away from the fire on his skin.

He cast a water repellent charm and walked to the greenhouses, further dismantling the remaining Occlumency he'd let consume him. He entered the greenhouse, immediately stifled by the humidity inside.

One of the scars on his chest throbbed. Draco sighed; he unbuttoned the rest of his shirt and pressed gently against a fading red outline. His worst scar crossed his ribs on the left side of his body, extensive and painful from his attempt at removal. He prodded, trying to get a sense

for the stage of healing.

Despite the slow, slogging process of experimenting—testing and failure, over and over—Draco saw progress, too, infinitesimal as it was. The scar on his ribs almost looked normal, felt normal. And when he'd tried to remove it with an everyday scar removing solution, it *almost* worked. Until it started burning from the residual dark magic that rebelled against it, of course.

“Why are they so—irritated?”

Draco's head snapped up, pulled to the greenhouse entry where Granger stood, door halfway open, eyes wide as she took in the horror show on his chest: silver scars rimmed in red or purple or blue or green, various stages of trauma and healing with a few burns scattered in between.

He pulled his shirt closed, clutching the fabric together with his left hand.

Fuck.

His head felt sluggish, raw, and like a fwooper had taken up residence, in desperate need of a silencing charm. He tried to engage his Occlumency anyway, already panicked under the weight of her evaluation.

He froze it out and flaked it away; panic left in a shard somewhere deep in his subconscious. Granger let the door slam shut behind her and crossed the room before he could blink.

“Stop it,” she said. “Don't do that, please just—stop occluding, gods.” Her chest heaved, a deep breath as she ran her hands through her mass of curls: a quagmire of twists and turns and spirals he wanted to lose himself in.

He isolated that feeling, too, and flaked it away.

“Draco, stop. *Please*,” she put her hand on his, the one holding his shirt together. He flinched away; her skin felt like fire. But even as he dropped his hand, she didn't, her soft palm coming to rest against his exposed chest.

He froze.

“You're freezing.”

He was.

Except for where her hand touched him. There, he was molten: churning and spilling and spreading.

“Please,” she said again, and when it felt like she might pull her hand away, he reached up to hold her in place, fingers wrapping lightly around her wrist. His Occlumency crashed in an avalanche under her order, incapable of denying her.

She must have recognized the change because she softened, the stiffness in her hand relaxing against his chest. If she branded him with that hand he wouldn’t have minded carrying her mark, better than his other.

“I have them, too,” she said. “More than just the one.” She held up her left arm in a weak gesture. She pointed to a thin line on her neck he’d never noticed before. “Same knife.”

He blinked. He wondered how long this suspension of reality would last: her hand on his chest, his holding her wrist, so close he could smell something warm, sweet, and vaguely vanilla drifting from her hair and skin. It was as if they’d been paused in time, perhaps a new feature of Theo’s time turner, where they could speak and move and exist inside a bubble where, for a moment, consequences seemed so very inconsequential.

“I have one on my chest, too. From the Department of Mysteries. It was a nasty curse but—Dolohov, he was silenced at the time, so it could have been much worse.”

I’ll remove that one for you too, he wanted to say. He wanted to erase it all, every memory, every scar, that made her eyes turn down like that, caught in the unpleasantness of a past she shouldn’t have had to endure.

“What’s happening to them?” she asked. The pad of her forefinger moved against his skin, brushing the scar beneath it.

“I’ve been experimenting.”

He held her gaze, trying to ignore the litany of reasons why any measure of closeness to Granger was a bad idea. How could it be? When her hands lit him on fire and burned away the fog in his brain. When she looked like goodness, and wholeness, and hope with a halo of ridiculous curls and a constellation begging to be drawn across her

face. He wanted to kiss her. He wanted to hold her. He wanted to have her on every surface in that greenhouse, learning the sighs and sounds she reserved for lovers.

“Experimenting on yourself? With what?” she asked. He knew he didn’t imagine the quiet, breathy tone in her voice.

“I’m trying to extract dark magic from scars. So they can be removed.”

A flash and crack of thunder drowned out the sound of her surprise: an intake of breath he had the pleasure of watching in close proximity.

His mother had assumed he meant the potion for himself. Would Granger think the same?

The rain on the glass greenhouse roof reminded Draco of his own heartbeat, hammering inside his ears: thudding erratic and wild.

Sound seemed to go the way that time had, exiting the space around them, leaving a hollow vacuum where time stood still, and he could nearly hear the sound of Granger’s blinking, of her thinking.

His right hand moved at the behest of instincts he couldn’t control, fingers finding her waist in a halting, almost-touch. But she drifted into it, and he to her, and when he looked again, they were very nearly touching from head to toe, her hand still on his chest between them.

He swallowed: a man hanged by the very last thread of his self-control. With a deep breath or a stiff breeze, his nose would touch hers, his mouth just as close. He employed every last ounce of his unraveling restraint.

“I need you to tell me to stop,” he said, and the act of bringing those words to life almost brushed their lips together. Her eyes fluttered shut and the thread holding him up, away, snapped.

Then she opened her eyes again, lips so close to sampling his that her words were traded more by flesh than by air.

“You’re betrothed.”

And it was like lightning had shattered the glass roof above them, soaking him in freezing rainwater that restarted time and sharpened his lust-hazed brain.

He stepped back, forcing one foot, then the other, to create space between him and a bad decision.

Fuck.

He disappeared before he had the chance to change his mind.

—

Astoria and Narcissa had chosen the solarium for their wedding planning luncheon. They'd decided not to fuss over warming charms in the crisp October air while they juggled seating arrangements, musical accompaniments, and a wine list longer than several of the books found in the estate's library. Narcissa insisted on Draco's presence because *of course* he should be involved.

Because Hermione had been very, very correct in her assessment.

He was, in fact, betrothed. Furthermore, he'd somehow ended up exactly where he'd been years ago: in his ancestral home doing what his parents asked of him even when he'd come to realize he did not want to. Or, in this case, never wanted to.

From the solarium windows, designed to immerse a viewer in as much of the grounds as possible without leaving the comfort of the manor, Draco could see the greenhouses beyond the rose garden. If he turned his head just so, the glass-paneled roof glinted with a sharp stab of late afternoon sunlight, making it impossible to ignore or forget. The damned thing taunted him while he only halfway listened to a conversation about string quartets.

And that would be his life: half-listening to conversations he didn't care about. Following a social event schedule. A lovely wife he'd have to learn to love. Predictability. Palatability.

He forced himself to look away from the taunting greenhouse and back at the meal he shared with his mother and his betrothed. It felt so impersonal, so unreal. Not unlike how it felt to sit and hear his mother tell him the Dark Lord would like for him to take the Mark, to recoup the favor lost by his father.

Astoria said something about Vivaldi.

Narcissa made a comment about cabernet.

Draco snapped.

“Astoria,” he said, turning in his chair to face her more directly. He reached out, taking her delicate hands in his. His fingers twitched; he might break them. “Do you want to marry me?”

Her look of befuddlement over his sudden touch compounded, doubled in on itself as her brows drew together. Her head tilted, and she let out a nervous laugh, baffled, before she transformed it into that socialite tittering he hated so much. She pulled herself together quickly, almost easily.

“We’re already engaged,” she said with a smile. She tilted her head towards the table between them: scattered with seating arrangements and wine pairing suggestions. “A bit past engaged, actually.”

“No—I mean. If you had a choice, would you have picked me?”

Draco tensed at the sharp inhale to his left. His mother’s outrage sliced through his determination with better efficiency than a well-cast *diffindo*. He continued despite the tatters torn into his sails.

“Would I? Draco, you’re my betrothed...”

He squeezed her hands and leaned forward, trying to block out the sounds of disapproval coming from the other end of the table where his mother’s surprise had likely taken a turn towards ire. Draco astonished himself with his own audacity; he could only imagine his mother’s feelings on the matter. But he’d already started, already taken this moment, and all the ones that followed, hostage for himself. He had to ask. He had to know. He had to do *something* other than sit and agree and take what was handed to him, much as he hated it, with a smile covering his silent dissent.

He sighed.

She had blue eyes, so very similar to his mother’s.

“I know we’re betrothed but—I don’t mean to be cruel. But— *fuck*, I think I’m going to be. That was a selfish question, I apologize.” He grimaced, fumbled like a fool. His mother admonished his use of vile language; he ignored her and forged ahead. “Perhaps I was hoping your answer would be an emphatic no and that it would make it easier for me to say that I would not have chosen you.”

“Draco!” Narcissa rose from her seat, flatware clattering. Her voice rose just enough to inform him that she was very, deadly serious. But he could hardly stop now. Like a firestorm, like a flood, like a burst of uncontrolled magic.

“Not now, Mother,” he said, a thrill of independence shooting through him. “I’m taking a moment to be in charge of my own life.”

Astoria looked to Narcissa, searching for something. Draco didn’t flinch, didn’t move. He gave Astoria his entire focus, waiting for her to return to the conversation that could only happen between the two of them, regardless of how much involvement his mother might prefer. Her fingers flexed beneath his own as she looked back to him.

He’d already dug himself too deep, he kept shoveling: “I don’t know you. I have no reason to know you outside of this arrangement. And I’m sure you’re lovely. From what I’ve seen you clearly are but—”

“I wouldn’t have picked you.”

Her words came out strong, certain, and relieved. It felt like the first truly genuine thing to exist between them.

“I’d like the opportunity to pick,” he said. “Wouldn’t you?”

She nodded and released a shallow, nervous breath. Draco almost felt bad; he’d effectively just blown up her life. Only through sheer luck of circumstance had she agreed to it.

He released her hands and sat back, creating space but feeling closer to her than he ever had. He turned to his mother.

Narcissa stood very still, controlled breathing moving her chest just enough to confirm she hadn’t been stunned. Her lips had nearly disappeared, pressed into a thin, tense line as she seethed. More than that, her eyes searched him: confusion and anger, like she was looking at a stranger, trying to make sense of what he’d just done, who he’d just been.

“I’m sorry to have wasted your time, Mother.”

He stood from his seat and bent to give Astoria a kiss on the cheek. He took a half step towards his mother to do the same, but stopped as she lifted a single hand, as quick as a viper strike, warning him not to approach. He dipped his head, acknowledging, and left the solarium an entire engagement lighter.

Seeing Granger the day after the luncheon where he effectively lit his life on fire and walked away—his first time seeing her since the things that did and did not happen in the greenhouses—felt like stepping through a fog that finally cleared.

And the day went horribly.

Breakfast with his parents had been a painful, silent affair. Uncomfortable and awkward, as neither his mother nor father spoke to him. Neither of them acknowledged that he and Astoria had effectively dissolved their betrothal the day prior. Lucius focused on the *Daily Prophet* with a near deadly force, taking deep, calming breaths through his nose, lips only relinquishing their twisted pursing for the occasional indulgence in his tea.

Draco couldn't bring himself to leave until his parents excused him, having already grossly exceeded the liberties he could take with their patience. As such, he didn't leave the dining room until five minutes after nine, dismissal evolving into a stalemate over who might speak first.

Narcissa finally relented with a terse and quiet, "You may go," eyes fixed on a slice of melon in front of her.

He met Granger halfway down the corridor heading to the wing they'd been working in the week prior. Her steps echoed heavily through the space, evidence of an annoyed stomp.

"You're late," she said, and not in a teasing way. It sounded more like an accusation, like a hex she meant to hurl.

And rather than a reasonable response, Draco fell into old, familiar habits. It was so easy to do without the Occlumency, without the betrothal, without anything controlling him. She tapped her foot, watching him like she half expected him to jinx her. She had her wand in her hand, knuckles flushing as she flexed her grip around it. Her hair had taken on a life of its own.

"Your hair looks like a pixie's nest."

She rolled her eyes and let out a frustrated breath, turning and marching away from him. She threw her response over her shoulder, voice tight and bordering on shrill.

“Real mature, Malfoy.”

Admittedly, it had not been exceptionally mature. But it also felt oddly like the first time he’d really spoken to her, out from under someone else’s thumb. It elated him.

It was hardly as if he could open with I ended my betrothal because I realized I couldn't keep doing what everyone else told me to do. But I also ended it, in very large part, because I can't stop thinking about how you've practically moved into my home, into my head, into the space inside my chest I might tentatively call my fucking heart.

Instead, he insulted her hair and laughed at the way she stomped away. He rolled his eyes when she did something utterly exasperating. He stood too close and listened carefully as she cast her spells and performed her diagnostics, learning whether she wanted him to or not. He let her huff at him and correct his wand movements when he imitated her incorrectly. He called her a swot when she forced him to listen to the entire history of her diagnostic spells because apparently the context was important.

He let himself enjoy the warm vanilla scent of her—shampoo? Lotion? Perfume? And he let the day pass, rife with banter and frustration and relatively tense conversation, because it finally felt like the first they could have without everything else getting in the way. He didn’t say a thing about his betrothal, or lack thereof.

He simply existed, for the first time in a long time, for himself.

Chapter End Notes

thank you thank you thank you to everyone who is reading and commenting and having a grand ole time with me. i'm genuinely floored by the thoughtful conversation, general excitement, and the all-around amazing time this fic has been to write and post and we've really only just begun! i certainly hope you enjoyed this chapter! thank you again for reading! i adore you all!

and of course, so many thanks to [icepower55](#), [Endless_musings](#), and [persephone_stone](#) for their neverending support!

Chapter 11: -2.250, -2.333, -2.416

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

November

tock

Three weeks of waiting slipped by before Lucius finally summoned Draco to his office. It came as no surprise, Draco had been expecting it—waiting for it—since the moment his mother had lifted her hand in complete fury and disappointment. Three weeks of stunted, almost-nonexistent conversations at breakfasts and dinners. Three weeks of riling Granger while watching her work and finally feeling like a free, normal person in her presence. He knew, but hadn't fully realized, how much effort it had taken for him to occlude most of his days away, or pretend not to think half the thoughts he had. The absence of that effort left room for so much more living.

Three weeks of refining his experiments, trying to bind his potions to the theory he'd learned from Granger about her diagnostic spells. Three weeks of the scars on his chest burning less and less, fighting back against his attempts at healing them less and less.

It happened like this:

Draco knocked on the heavy paneled door a moment before his father's voice carried through it with a sharp, "Enter."

He walked into the office with hardly any expectations. He expected a lecture. He expected disappointment. Beyond that, he expected little else.

Lucius didn't look up from the parchments in front of him, and that image echoed with a boom, reverberating through Draco's memory. He'd been here before. Done this before. He took his seat across from Lucius's desk, waiting for neither direction nor permission.

Silence stretched on the razor-thin edge of one man's patience and another's ire. Draco felt it, considered the balance, teetering, and let out a breath, enough to totter.

“You’re displeased,” Draco said.

Lucius paused, quill against parchment. Draco stared at the grandfather clock behind the desk, just above his father’s head. He watched the second-hand tick, counting the time between his words and his father’s response.

Another echo rattled through him, one of sand in an hourglass, counting a different kind of time.

Lucius set his quill on the desk and offered Draco the parchment, a sneer twisting his lip to something sour.

“The dissolution of your betrothal agreement. It requires your signature.”

Draco didn’t look at the parchment. Instead, he watched his father’s face, trying not to shrink under the withering discontent he found there. Finally, he glanced down at the parchment in his hands.

“This was initiated by the Greengrass Estate.”

“Of course it was.”

“You weren’t going to—after Astoria and I—”

“I had no intention of sabotaging a year’s worth of negotiations because you said something idiotic. But the girl clearly convinced her father—”

“—Because neither of us wanted it—” Draco broke off, blanching. He held a breath deep in his lungs, appalled at himself for interrupting, knowing it would only worsen his father’s mood.

“The Greengrasses are a fine, respectable family.”

A beat. Draco took the silence to mean he should respond.

“She didn’t want to marry me, either, Father.”

“The point of a betrothal is that it isn’t a choice. It is a strategic partnership between families.”

A knuckle in Draco’s left hand cracked, distractingly loud in the large office. He hadn’t even been aware of how hard he’d clenched his hand into a fist. There were several things Draco wanted to say. He took a breath, and with past regrets and future hopes battling for attention,

Draco said one of them.

“I’m not available to act as a pawn in games of strategy, Father.”

Lucius laughed a liquid, toxic laugh that washed over Draco’s skin and burned away his confidence.

“It was difficult enough to broker that match. With the Parkinson girl out of the picture it will be difficult to find another household willing to marry into ours.”

Draco had been completely ignored. So he said another of the many things he wanted to say.

“That predicament is our own doing.”

Lucius didn’t respond. It was as if Draco had no voice, or that his voice had no sound.

“You’ve accepted more responsibility in the family affairs. The account you’re managing, how is it performing?”

“Well.”

Barely. He tracked profits and margins almost as obsessively as he brewed his experimental potions. It was boring, dull, tedious work. It meant a parliament of owls to and from Gringotts and subscriptions to several herbology periodicals to familiarize himself with his investments. He’d considered owling Neville Longbottom in one or two moments of exceptional frustration. He barely had a profit to show for any of it. But this was the one piece of involvement in the family affairs he’d been given. So he handled it. He tried to appreciate and enjoy it.

“You aren’t allowed both, Draco.”

He blinked. Confused at what his father meant, but a hot flush behind his ribs felt like a warning.

“You will either accept your role as heir to this household and all that it entails, or you don’t.”

All that it entails. The wife he did not want. The business that did not interest him. And yet, the only paths to belonging.

And if I don’t want all that it entails? He wanted to say it, he could feel it—just there—poised on a traitorous tongue. But he’d already

delivered so much disrespect, upset his father in so many ways. There were limits, lines that could not be crossed no matter how much he wanted to cross them, just to see the other side.

Granger's frustratingly optimistic voice floated through his head, suggesting that his life did not have to operate in ultimatums. That he could be his family's heir and still have some measure of control over the path his life took. Especially now, after already having surrendered so much control for so long. It seemed like the sort of reasonable optimism she would spew.

But Granger's logic had no place in a meeting with Lucius Malfoy. Logic and tradition did not mix. Ultimatums and history did not listen to reason.

Draco bit his tongue, holding his treasonous words inside.

Lucius dismissed him, and the tightness in his face looked more like disappointment than anything else. It sank something inside Draco's chest; even when he won, he lost. He'd clawed himself out of one pit only to stumble into another.

He paused at the door. He wondered.

Change didn't have to be their enemy.

Did Lucius even know how hard he fought it?

—

"I distinctly remember being told I'd have a part in this process," Theo said as he sat next to Draco in the middle of a November afternoon. Granger had been working inside the room across from his chaise for the last forty-five minutes, and Draco had started growing twitchy, resisting the urge to check up on her. Knowing she'd be annoyed by his overbearing concern—her words, not his—kept him reluctantly rooted to his seat.

"Afternoon, Theo. Welcome to my home."

"Not exactly your home. Not anymore."

"Semantics."

Theo snatched the book from Draco's hands and tossed it on the floor, where it slid along granite tiles with an obscene sort of scraping sound. Draco blinked, watching as it finally came to a stop several feet away.

"What the fuck was that for?" Draco asked, rising, only to fall back down, stumbling from a jelly-legs jinx. "*Theo*." The threat in his tone landed flat, mostly exasperated.

"We need to talk," Theo said as if this were a perfectly reasonable way to initiate a conversation.

"And my book was an impediment to that?"

"And since you haven't actually invited me to be here"—he spoke over Draco's question, gesturing around them—"I've taken it upon myself to 'distract you,' isn't that how you put it?"

"Theo—"

"And what excitement to witness, wouldn't you say? This *corridor*, thrilling. You *reading*, I can hardly contain myself—"

"Theo—"

"Where's Granger?" Theo's tone dropped, performative pitch abandoned in favor of something suddenly serious. Facing moderate whiplash from Theo's shift, Draco nodded dumbly towards the door across from them.

"Does she know?" Theo asked.

"Know what?"

"I'm not generally a very violent person, Draco. But I find myself wanting to hit you."

His betrothal. Or rather, lack thereof, then.

"It hasn't come up—and how do *you* know anyway?"

Theo breathed a disbelieving sort of laugh.

"*Obviously*, Pansy told me after Daphne told her after Astoria told her after you apparently told her you didn't want to marry her over a lovely crudité and tea service, you fucking twat."

Draco had his eyes glued on the door across from them, newly invested in Granger taking as long as she needed to decommission that particular room.

“What happened to *only having supportive things to say*?” Draco asked, turning to Theo and hissing the words in as low a whisper as he could manage.

“Me being supportive and you being a twat aren’t mutually exclusive—Oh, afternoon, Granger.”

Draco’s eyes snapped back up. Granger had exited her room and stood at the doorway with her head tilted, looking at them with curiosity.

“Question for you, Granger: whales?”

She blinked, blank with confusion before she smiled.

“Whales?”

“Yes. Do muggles believe in those?”

“Yes, Theo.”

Theo made a thoughtful noise. “Interesting.”

She laughed, shook her head, and then walked to the next room.

“I’ve got work to do so I’ll just leave you two to—”

“Yes, yes, Granger. You’re a very busy woman, don’t let us keep you.”

Draco must have dropped into an alternate reality, inter-dimensional travel, a dream world. The door clicked behind Granger, and he turned back to Theo.

“Whales?”

“Muggles don’t think dragons are real. Makes me wonder what other animals they don’t believe in.”

“Whales aren’t magical.”

“They breathe air but live underwater. And muggles don’t know about kelpies; I’m fairly certain whales and kelpies are related. And then there’s business at Loch Ness.”

“There aren’t enough hours in the day for you to pick up a magical creatures hobby, too.”

“Maybe that’s what I made that time-turner for.”

Draco sighed. Theo was in one of *those* moods. He did not relish having to reign in his focus.

“About me being a twat?”

Theo lifted his brows as if to say *you brought it up, not me*.

“Did you do it for her?”

“I’m not—Theo, don’t.”

“I’m neither blind nor an idiot. And I’m friends with *both* of you now. I see things.”

“Theo she’s not—I doubt she’d ever.” Draco’s shoulders sank, words stalling.

“I hope you did it for her—is what I mean to say,” Theo added with a shrug. “Blaise might be the only Seer amongst us, but I have a good feeling about the two of you.” Theo paused, then shuddered. “And please don’t make me repeat that. It was hard enough to say the once.”

Draco felt his eyes widening, brows furrowing, confusion and disbelief and something distinctly grateful winding its way around his throat, choking his response.

Theo settled against the back of the chaise, a forced and familiar air of nonchalance overtaking his demeanor. “This is boring. Is this what it’s like watching me try to break into my family vault?”

Theo’s nonchalance—a shift executed with practiced ease—suggested a strange, unlikely approval of Draco’s situation with Granger, denied for so long.

“This is much more exciting. Granger actually accomplishes something,” he said, knowing Theo would take offense.

Even with shrinking and featherlight charms, packing up and moving the manor's haphazard potions lab turned out to be no small task. Draco kept finding vials he'd forgotten about: all manner of colorful concoctions he couldn't remember if he'd already tested. He couldn't even confidently identify many of them. In a month's-long string of iterative potions experimentation, fuschia, magenta, mauve, and maroon all started to look the same, mean the same. Knowing Draco's luck, at least one would burn a hole straight through his skin.

The cauldrons were complicated. He couldn't move them with active brews, which meant finishing all his experiments and resisting the urge to start new ones until he'd set up a new lab in his flat. It would be worth it though, for the independence, for the space he needed.

"I had to ask Topsy where you were."

Draco startled, nearly dropping the cauldron he'd been levitating. He brought it to rest on the workbench and turned to find Hermione at the entrance to his lab—or, what would imminently be his former lab.

He smiled, mostly against his will.

"I'm sure she was honored to assist you."

Hermione's mouth twisted and her shoulders sank. He saw the tiny twitch towards a smile at the edge of her lips, betraying her. "Overwhelmingly so."

"She has a touch of hero-worship: causes me indigestion. Or perhaps she's considering nesting in your hair."

Hermione rolled her eyes and took a step into the space with him, curious eyes scanning the room as she tried to hide her grin with a very unconvincing scowl.

"You're not concerned I'll ruin your ancestral home today?" She glanced at her watch. "I've been alone for almost two hours. Who knows what havoc I've already wreaked."

No, he was not worried in the slightest. She'd probably implode from disgrace at her failed duty before she did anything even remotely unprofessional. Which could be interesting to watch. But moving his lab had been an excellent excuse to avoid her. Day after day, her proximity grew exhausting, overwhelming, tangible in a way he

couldn't explain.

He needed a break from the overwhelming *want* of her: her acceptance, her friendship, her laugh, her pretty fucking lips. His father would be furious if he found out Draco had left her to her own devices. But on the extensive list of things that made his father furious, a little autonomy for Hermione barely registered when Draco had things like familial duty and failed marriage contracts to consider.

He shrugged. "I trust you."

She paused, eyes catching on what probably looked like chaos in stasis around him.

"What are you doing?"

"Moving my potions setup to my flat. I—don't like being here more than I need to be."

He could have told her about breaking off his betrothal then. It was but one of many opportunities he'd had in the last month. But he couldn't do it. Every time he thought he might, he hid from it. Telling her felt like placing expectations on her, like there was some unspoken thing they'd agreed upon that said his betrothal was the problem, the thing holding so much at bay. But being unspoken meant that there was the very real possibility that he'd only imagined it, assumed it. Being almost-friends with her without the weight of his looming nuptials could be enough.

The problem, though, was that he knew it wouldn't be. Because while he didn't have expectations, he had *wants*. So fucking many of them. Most of them involving his mouth and her skin. Her lips and his cock. Her head and his heart.

"Would you like some help?"

With getting the image of you, naked and bent over one of these tables, out of my head? Yes.

That runaway thought stole his ability to answer with anything but a strangled, "Sure."

Which was how he ended up with Hermione Granger in his fucking flat.

Hermione helped Draco move several cauldrons and a fair few more boxes of ingredients into the room he'd set aside in his flat for brewing. She worked diligently, methodically, and as if helping him move his potions set up was the most important thing about her being there. Draco had difficulty separating her actual purpose from the strange and overwhelming intimacy of having her in his home.

This place was his, not his family's. It felt like cracking open a part of himself and letting her peek inside. He'd only ever had Theo and Blaise over. And now Hermione Granger could be added to that limited list. Brilliant as she was, he knew she'd see the differences. Dark grain wood floors that echoed in a key entirely unlike granite and tile. Bright white walls and high ceilings, as far from masonry and brocade wallpapers as he could find. Green and black and silver, bookcases and broomsticks, a grandfather clock with a miniature snitch zipping behind the glass face: light and life and everything he could think of to make a space entirely *him*, entirely unlike the manor.

With the last box ferried through the Floo, Hermione collapsed on the green velvet sofa in his main living room, helping herself to his hospitality, it seemed. She smiled, giving the cushion beside her a fond sort of pat.

"My old friend," she said wistfully, leaning over and letting her head rest again the arm. From where Draco stood near the fireplace, he heard her stifle a giggle. "It's not very comfortable, is it?"

"Don't insult your first conquest."

She made a humming sound, sitting back up. She rolled her neck, stretching as if she'd been lounging for hours and not the scant handful of seconds she'd spent pretending to rest.

"My first of many."

On the topic of conquests, Draco couldn't help but include himself in that count.

She popped up from the couch, crossing the room with such speed he wondered if she'd used magic to propel herself. She stopped in front of his bookcase.

"You have books."

Obviously. But there was something so earnest in her tone that any snide responses evaporated in his mouth, leaving something only

partly playful.

“I do know how to read.”

“The snark’s not necessary, Draco.” She smiled as she said it, fingers trailing the spines of several books in front of her.

And even though she wasn’t even looking at him, certainly wasn’t touching him, he could *feel* her observation. He could feel her fingertips, grazing book spines or his own, it felt the same. Reading the titles felt like reading him, knowing him. He could feel the prick and tingle of scrutiny shooting a thrill through him: a surge from being seen. These were his books. Not the manor’s. Mostly potions texts, a few on herbology, an odd novel or two. Hardly a complex collection, but things he’d chosen to bring with him when he moved and that felt like it mattered.

“I rather think the snark is essential to my personality, actually.”

That he spoke at all was a bit of a miracle, dry throat trying to hold the words in.

Her hand dropped, fingers finished in their exploration. It felt like a loss. She turned away from the bookshelf, facing him again.

“Do you like fiction?”

“I do.”

She bit her lip, a litany of thoughts rushing across her face.

“Do you—would you—read muggle fiction?”

Draco didn’t know if that offended him or not. Perhaps it should? Or perhaps it didn’t matter? Was the point that she thought he might not read muggle fiction? Or did it matter more that she thought he might be willing to try? All he knew was that he wanted to touch that bottom lip of hers, taste it, take it for himself and wrench whatever lovely sounds he could from her in the process, books be damned.

“I’m not opposed, no.”

She didn’t elaborate. Instead, she smiled, lips spreading wide.

He had to get her out of his home. She’d already generated enough fantasy fodder to last him a lifetime. He couldn’t take it anymore.

“We should head back,” he said.

Her eyes widened. “I’m supposed to be working.”

She looked like someone had just prophesied her early death, color dropping out of her face, horror spelled in the soft ‘O’ made by her mouth.

Draco laughed, even when she frowned at him for doing so. Gods, it was so fucking earnest, so precious, so *beautiful* he could hardly stand it.

“I won’t tell if you won’t, Granger.”

She looked at him for the space of another breath—enough time for him to remember how very seriously he needed her out of his flat—before she reached for the Floo powder and returned to the manor and, presumably, her work.

—

Since forcing Hermione to teach him the theory, incantation, and wand movements associated with her diagnostic spells, Draco experimented with every method he could conceive of to bind that magic to his potion. Its simplicity had to be the answer: a way to identify and isolate the dark magic, to pull it from the scar tissue where it could then be destroyed, no damage done to the body. Every iteration thus far had been a disaster. Until—

He massaged his chest, fingers tracing a smooth expanse of skin without interruption: nothing upraised, nothing mottled, nothing sore, nothing cursed. Draco transfigured a mirror from a shard of glass—what had once been a vial for his potion before he’d dropped it in surprise—and examined his chest.

The largest of his *sectumsempra* scars, the one that bisected his torso, twisting around his ribs on the left side, formerly red and purple and generally quite irritated, had vanished. Or, more appropriately, Draco vanished it with a simple scar smoothing potion, something that only worked to any degree because his *other* potion, the one he’d finally managed to bind part of Hermione’s diagnostics spells to, had successfully rid the scar of lingering dark magic.

It had been a simple thing, an easy thing, once he knew how to do it. Success merely required the right combination of ingredients, magic, and time. No different than any other potion he'd ever brewed. The act of trial and error simply expanded time's role in the equation.

He started brewing a larger batch immediately, buoyed by the adrenaline of discovery. He was a fucking genius. He'd done a thing—*invented* a thing—that not even the healers at St. Mungo's had done.

He brewed for too long. Which made him late for breakfast. Which made him late meeting Hermione.

She surprised him, waiting for him instead of the other way around, standing in the middle of the most recent corridor she'd been working in. She tapped her foot, eyes narrowed, arms crossed, with a parchment crushed in her hands, practically vibrating with what looked suspiciously like furious energy.

She marched straight up to him, eyes *definitely* alight with anger. She whacked the parchments—a copy of *The Daily Prophet* —against his chest, forcing him to take it. One day earlier and the action would have smacked directly on the scar he'd removed mere hours earlier. It stalled him momentarily, marveling at the absence of what had been there for so long.

“What is that?” she asked, a stiff jerk of her hand towards the paper he now held.

He raised a brow, in too good a mood to be put off by whatever had soured her so severely.

“Is snark still disallowed, or shall I explain what a periodical is?”

“Table the snark, Malfoy. Page three. What is that announcement?”

He tried to think of the last time she'd called him Draco. He missed it. He'd almost grown accustomed to his given name spoken by her lips, even when she used this swotty, authoritative tone.

He opened the Prophet and flipped to page three. *Ah*. He tried not to sigh, knowing she would probably catalogue his every last reaction, but the breath slipped from him regardless.

“It looks an awful lot like a statement rescinding my betrothal announcement.”

Because of course the dissolution of a marriage contract between two Sacred Twenty Eight families warranted a news piece.

“Why?”

“I’ll need you to narrow down the scope of your question, Granger. Why is there an announcement? Because the contract has been dissolved. Why has it been dissolved? Because neither Astoria nor I had any interest in engaging in—”

“Why didn’t you say anything?”

Draco literally could not fathom of a worse ‘why’ for her to want the answer to.

“It’s hardly a casual conversation topic,” he said, hedging. “Oh, Granger, did that snuffbox shock you? Also, did you know I’m no longer betrothed?”

Her frown deepened as she crossed her arms. Draco let his hand holding the Prophet drop to his side, pinching at the bridge of his nose with the other. He didn’t know what she wanted from him. He’d not told her specifically to avoid upsetting her, not wanting her to think he meant or expected anything by it. But now, she was upset that he hadn’t said anything.

“When did it happen?” she asked. Her voice lost a bit of its edge, quieting.

“Last month.”

“Last month?”

“After.”

He didn’t elaborate. He simply watched her face, waiting for recognition, if there was any. Was there a before and after for her, too? There certainly had been for him. Before that moment in the greenhouse, and after. Two separate states of being with a line between them painted by her hand on his chest.

Her brows lifted, just enough.

For her, too, then.

He shouldn’t have felt a rush of excitement at that little realization, but he did all the same. He probably ought not wish for her to have

experienced even a fraction of the strange, half-existence of not really acknowledging whatever was or was not happening between them.

The fact that for her there had been a before where now there was an after; it felt like a snitch behind his ribs in rapid flight, struggling to escape.

“Oh,” she finally said, looking past him.

“It didn’t seem fair to marry her,” he elaborated, entirely unprompted. “And as it turns out, she didn’t want to marry me, either. We both would have been doing it out of a sense of misplaced duty.”

“Misplaced duty,” she said, an almost silent repetition of his words. She still looked past him, somewhere over his left shoulder, not totally a participant in conversation with him.

“I think I’ve had enough of misplaced duty in my life.”

Her eyes finally flickered to him, an expressive, open brown.

He wondered then if he should kiss her. *Really* kiss her. Not a theoretical wondering in an inappropriate moment. But rather, a real moment where he could actually dip his head and bring his mouth to hers. Every muscle in his body practically pushed him to do it: warm and thrumming and drawn to her. He probably could. Maybe he should.

But he didn’t. He didn’t want to kiss her for the first time, or possibly any time, in his family estate. Nor did he think it should happen after enormous, likely confusing news.

But gods, he really wanted to kiss her.

And for the first time, he wondered if perhaps she might actually let him.

“Right,” she said with a small jolt, as if she had to physically throw off whatever had been on her mind. He knew what had been on his. He hadn’t even considered what might be on hers. “We almost have this wing finished; we should get to work.”

“We?”

The smirk formed slowly, almost calculated, and coupled with something mischievous behind her eyes.

“You’re effectively my assistant, Malfoy.”

“Draco,” he said, before he could even consider taking it back.

She blinked, smirk shifting into a smile.

“Hermione,” she said.

“Hermione.”

Her name tasted of chocolate truffles and apple caramel ice cream and dangerous new beginnings. Of things that came after.

Chapter End Notes

am i sounding like a broken record yet? y'all are simply the most spectacular folks. thank you so much for shouting at me on tumblr and on discord and leaving me lovely comments and hitting that kudos button even though it won't let you do it more than once xD genuinely, thank you so much for your support and enthusiasm for this story. i cannot believe we're almost a quarter of the way through it! this has been the most fun ride so far. thank you, thank you, thank you!

and as always, thanks to my heroes, saving us all from my first drafts: [icepower55](#), [Endless_musings](#), and [persephone_stone](#)! They've all got active wips that you should definitely check out!

Chapter 12: -2.166, -2.250, -2.333

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

December

tick

After, evidently, did not have a timeline. Time and distance from the conversation about Draco's shattered betrothal agreement only made it worse. Every day that passed—turning into weeks, taking them fully into December and steadily approaching the holidays—felt like another lost opportunity to *do* something about this new state of reality.

What could have been an abundance of freedom, gloriously absent of Draco's obsessive experimental brewing, had only morphed into an equally obsessive management of the account his father had entrusted him with. His numbers plummeted, something about supply problems in a particularly rare herb. Draco could hardly keep it straight, lost in a mass of letters delivered by owls at all hours of night and day: informing him of price changes, supply shortages, and a coup in a country he'd never heard of, but that apparently had some bearing on the numbers in his account.

He hated it. Truly, wholly, and completely hated it. It had none of the control, none of the finesse, none of the reward that brewing gave him. It felt like guesswork at best, and at worst, like wandering through a fog with his eyes closed, hoping he stumbled upon his destination. He'd been given *one* account. One tiny sliver of responsibility. And when he finally had time to devote something of himself to it, he probably would have had better luck letting his owl make the decisions. Or Topsy. Perhaps she knew a thing or two about rare herbology imports.

"I'm taking a few days off," Hermione said.

Her words came completely without warning, and in the middle of another long, awkward day of talking to each other like they didn't have something enormous and awkward and *wanting* hovering in the space between words and blinks and breaths. She'd just finished the

room she'd been working on for most of the week, a troublesome one with an especially unpleasant gobstone set.

"Oh," Draco said, lacking for any other kind of response.

"I was only planning to work half the day today, actually. The Ministry already approved it. I would have taken the whole day, but I wanted to finish this one"—she tilted her head backwards, towards the room she'd just exited—"since it's the last room in this hall."

"Who'd have thought gobstones could be so troublesome?"

She laughed: quiet, but genuine, filling the awkward, unknowable spaces between them.

"Anyone who's ever played with a Weasley prank set. Though this was certainly more difficult than those."

"I honestly didn't even know we had a gobstone set here."

She rolled her eyes, stepping away from the door—closer to him, but also to her bag, which was more likely her destination. That didn't stop the wondering, though: the intrusive little thrill that perhaps she sought closeness.

"To live in a home with so many rooms you don't even know what's in all of them."

"I don't live here anymore," he reminded her, a little tease, as she slid her wand into her bag. "We used to be a much bigger family—the Malfoys. But it's just the three of us, now. We hardly need to use all these rooms."

A beat of uneasy silence hovered.

"So you don't mind?" she asked, piercing the quiet. "That I leave a little early?"

"As exciting as the prospect sounds, I'm not actually your employer. You're free to do as you wish."

"As long as I don't defile the estate, of course."

"Of course."

She didn't move, bag slung over her shoulder, pulling at a curl caught beneath it. He almost reached out to free it.

But he didn't move, either.

When he noticed the silence again, so loud in its nothingness, his chest twinged, uncomfortable.

"Plans?" he asked. "Sorry—I mean, do you have any plans for your time off?"

"Oh, not especially. I'll just do some relaxing."

"Do I need to send Topsy to save you from your version of a holiday?"

"I might see my parents," she said, finally freeing her trapped curls from beneath the strap on her bag.

"Might?"

"We're—figuring it out. After..." She trailed off, still looking at him, but her eyes unfocused, pulled into whatever thought had crossed her mind. He had no idea what she meant, and he felt like he shouldn't ask. Something about the fragility in her tone and the distance in her eyes told him that whatever it was, it was personal.

And really, what right did Draco have to anything personal about her? Excepting for his very personal desires to touch her and kiss her and fuck her. But that was—different. That was fascination, attraction—it couldn't be *more*.

Self-delusion tasted sour these days.

"Oh, sorry," she said. "I forget sometimes. I don't have a particularly large social group and, well, everyone else knows. I forgot you probably don't."

That felt like an opening, a crack in a door he might pass through.

"Know—what?" he asked, hesitating only just.

She swallowed. Her smile looked strained, cheek twitching just enough that he wondered how hard she fought to keep it in place.

"I obliterated them. During the war."

The shock felt like a full body bind, locking him in place and freezing his muscles. Surprise with enough force to hold his body still while his mind spun, whirling out of control as he tried to make sense or reason out of what she'd just said.

“I sent them to Australia,” she continued. “They were safer not knowing me; they never would have understood, otherwise.” Draco wondered how many times she’d told herself that, trying to find her own belief in the words. He knew the feeling well. He’d just felt it: *it couldn’t be more*. “I managed to reverse it last year. They—well, things have been tense. We try to have dinner together every month or so.”

Draco couldn’t conceive of that. For as complicated and dysfunctional and wildly unhealthy as his relationship with his parents could be, he took at least two meals a day with them, every day. They had a routine, a foundation of togetherness that existed outside of any conflict they might have. Even when his mother likely wanted to slap him for sabotaging his betrothal, or when his father had to lecture him for speaking out of turn or with disrespect, they still dined together. Every morning and every night; they were a family, which meant they stuck together.

“I—” he tried to speak, say something. He both could and could not fathom it, how horrible it must be to have such uncertainty with one’s family. He almost said so, but he didn’t know if that would make her feel better or worse. Something inside him suggested worse.

Hermione seemed undeterred, continuing despite his failure at interrupting. Perhaps she needed to get it out, words flowing in a deluge of confession, and he, her confessor.

“I defied their trust. I know that. They don’t understand—not really. But it’s getting better. We’ll have breakfast together, on Christmas, I think.”

Draco’s chest clenched, something so sad, so heartbroken for the woman standing in front of him. To have any doubt, even a shard of it, that she might not get to spend a holiday with her family, it gutted him. Even knowing that he didn’t always want to spend time with his parents; he always had the option.

He absolutely, positively, was not worthy of this woman. How could a person like her even exist? It seemed outside the realm of possibility that a strength and a determination and a bravery like hers could be contained in one person’s body. Surely her magic would combust, or implode, or shatter under the weight of it.

“Anyway,” she said, still forging on as if that hadn’t been the most remarkable story ever told. “I have a gift for you. I hope you don’t think it’s too”—she blushed, a pretty pink—“well, it’s not really a gift,

exactly. You can't keep it."

Draco arched a brow. That she'd thought to give him something pulled him from the melancholy of thinking about her parents.

She reached into her bag and pulled out a wrapped package: suspiciously book-shaped.

"Hermione, if you're trying to give me that copy of *Hogwarts: A History* back—"

"I'm not, no." She smirked, though, like maybe she'd thought about it. "This is my favorite book, my personal copy I've had for ages. I love it, I would like it back. But—I wanted to share it with you." She blushed heavier, pink flushing into red as her words tumbled faster and faster. "You said you were open to muggle literature—it's, well, I love this book."

"To confirm," he said, smiling through what felt like true, overwhelming gratitude. "You love this book?"

She laughed, but looked away, clearly embarrassed. It was precious.

"Don't be a prat, yes."

"Thank you," he said. He tried to sound as sincere as possible. He didn't want her to feel uncomfortable, as fun as it was to tease and annoy her. That she'd thought of him, wanted to share something so personal with him, Merlin. He had to truncate that thought: not necessarily to pack it up and put it away, but rather save it for later when he didn't have to actively engage in conversation. "I—have a gift for you, too."

She tore her gaze from the stonework on the floor when he spoke, the corners of her eyes crinkling with excitement, tempering what looked an awful lot like surprise. Gods, it nearly killed him, realizing she might have thought her gift giving would be a one-sided affair.

"I didn't know you'd be taking time off," he said. "I don't have it wrapped or—well, ready. It's at my flat."

"Oh." Her face fell, lip pulled between her teeth. "Well, I'm sure it can wait until later. After the holidays."

It sounded like a question.

Could it be a question?

“No, I’d like for you to have it—do you, would you like to come over and I can grab it?”

He knew it was a bad idea even as he suggested it. He could have gone to get it and came back. He could have owled it to her. He could have done or suggested any number of things that did not involve Hermione Granger walking into his flat again. But gods, if he didn’t want her there. He liked the idea of having her in his home again. Of seeing her there, with him.

She smiled at his suggestion, and he knew he was done for.

“Yes, alright. That would be fine.”

—

It took less than ten seconds of standing awkwardly in his living room for Draco to regret his impulsive decision to invite Hermione over. It wasn’t so much the literal sense of having her in his home that was problematic. But more, having her in a place that was his, was *him*, and not clouded by his family history and the cold stone interior of an aristocratic manor.

The floors in his flat were a woodgrain. They’d been grown. And that felt—different.

“Just, give me a moment,” he said, gesturing to the green velvet sofa so she could sit.

He required time to breathe when he entered his potions lab. Firstly, over the relief that he’d made and kept a large batch of the potion, constantly tweaking and refining the effect of his experiment so that it not only worked, but it worked *well*, and *quickly*, and *pain free*; he couldn’t give her anything less than the best. But secondly, he had to catch his breath such that terror did not completely seize him.

It threatened to crack him, brittle and ready to break, like his bones might snap and shatter.

What had he been thinking?

Panic felt like ice lit on fire, contradiction in his veins.

She wasn't ashamed of her scar. She'd said so, very literally, to his face. She didn't need to cover it, she only did it for him; he knew that. Because who couldn't notice how pathetic he acted every time he saw that slur carved into her arm, how he sought it in flagellation by guilt?

How disgustingly presumptuous did that make him? He pressed his palm to his chest, over his heart, as if the pressure and heat could stop it from beating so fast. She would think him an absolute arse obsessed with image. Superficial. Vain. She'd already called him that, too, once.

Really, what had he been thinking?

Fuck.

He'd just wanted her to have a choice. That was it. That was all. She didn't have to take it. Didn't have to use it. But then his gift to her would be a bottle of something she did not want and months of work she'd probably be mortified to know about.

He felt an unfortunate sheen of sweat, probably cold and clammy, forming on his brow when he finally bottled a vial and left his lab. He felt like an uncertain teenager again, roiling with nerves.

Twenty two years of age felt old enough to not experience nerves like this. He walked back into the living room and found her sitting on the sofa, legs tucked beneath her, flipping through a potions periodical he'd left on the table. *Gods*, he'd spent so much time fighting with himself that she'd gotten bored and needed entertainment.

When she looked up at him, he saw a crease between her brows, hovering over wide, curious eyes. Nerves of her own.

His fingers twitched towards the vial in his pocket.

He couldn't do it. Not yet. He needed more time. A distraction. Fucking *something* to calm him.

"Would you like some tea?" he asked.

She'd clearly been expecting something—anything—else to come out of his mouth. Her head tilted. The crease between her brows deepened.

“Yes—please. Thank you. That would be lovely.”

She sounded so formal, like her words had tried to trip her, trick her, like she couldn't decide on which version of them were hers and which belonged to the formalities she hid behind.

“I make an excellent cup of tea.”

She rolled her eyes at his boast, shoulders relaxing. Draco's own did the same.

“I'm surprised,” she said. “I would have thought Topsy did that for you.”

“Mother doesn't prefer it. Certain things are sacred, and all that.” He waved his wand to summon his supplies.

Tea preparation didn't last nearly long enough to fully settle him. As he offered her a cup, his thoughts obsessed over the vial in his trouser pocket: either a very bad decision or a very good one. He suspected the former but hoped for the latter.

He sat beside her on the sofa, one full cushion's worth of space between them. Hermione took a sip of her tea, smiling kindly. It felt like an indication she enjoyed it.

Honestly, he expected a little more of a reaction than that. He made an *excellent* cup of tea. Objectively. She didn't seem nearly impressed enough. He sipped his own. Confirmation, an excellent brew.

Brew. Fuck.

“So,” he said, setting his tea aside. He reached into his pocket and pulled out the small vial. The potion, in its current iteration, was a lovely shade of lavender that reminded him of flowers and deep breathing and peace. So very different from the dark, angry purple so many curses manifested as. He held the bottle out to her.

He saw the curiosity, the questions, obvious in wide eyes as she reached for it. He wondered if she'd put it together already. She was brilliant, after all. And he'd told her, *before*, that he was experimenting with potions to remove cursed scars.

Surely she'd make the connection.

“I've realized I don't think you'll like it,” he said. Hot, uncomfortable

anxiety flushed him. He'd call it mortification, but the root of that word implied a death of some kind, and as he still unfortunately drew breath despite this embarrassment, mortification surely couldn't be the right term for it. Although, he wouldn't mind throwing himself out a window: death by defenestration.

"Why not?" she asked. She didn't say anything about what must have been a bright red flush creeping up his neck. His skin felt like embers crawled across it, up it, emanating from his heart and seeking his extremities. "You brewed something for me?"

She held the vial against the light, head quirking as she examined its properties. She wouldn't find any answers in its transparency, or its color, or in any floating particulate. She wouldn't find any acceptable combination of properties to help her identify it. And evidently, she hadn't connected the thing he'd told her two months before with the vial in her hands.

"I did. Well—I invented a potion for you."

She froze, blinking. Then, her hand and the vial dropped to her lap as she looked back at him. He watched her fingers tighten around the glass, as if protecting it, cherishing it.

"It—ah. It's the one I told you I was working on, a couple months ago, do you remember?" She had to remember, how could she not? They'd nearly spiraled into a black hole together. "It's for cursed scars, like I said. I found a way to bind your diagnostics to it, actually. It—well, it draws out the cursed magic so the scar can be healed. It was for you." He needed her to know that part. If nothing else. She needed to know. "I was only testing it on myself. But it was always for you. Only for you. In case you—"

He'd been trying so hard not to look at her arm. But his gaze flicked there, mostly out of instinct, a reference to the thing he mentioned. He really, desperately, hadn't wanted to look. Because then she looked, too, following his gaze.

She would hate it.

He was an idiot.

But she didn't yell at him. Didn't say anything. She stared at her arm for several beats longer than he did, his attention now on her face, watching as his act of stupidity sunk in.

Her knuckles flushed white around the potion, and he worried for a moment that she might crack the glass with the force of her hold.

“It would,” she started, then paused, then swallowed. She looked up at him. *Gods*, she looked like she might cry. He’d truly fucked this up beyond all measure. “It would—remove this?” she asked. She held up her arm, covered by a sleeve, but they both knew what she meant, as if there were ever anything else she could possibly mean.

“Yes. I’m sorry—I didn’t mean to suggest that it’s needed. I know that you—”

He broke off, watching as her hands shook, setting the vial on the table. It clinked, an unsteady tapping of glass on the marble top as she struggled to place it upright. She pulled her hand back to her lap, clasping it with her other, wringing them together. She hadn’t reached for her wand. Hopefully that meant she didn’t intend on jinxing him.

She looked up at him, agony on the brink. He heard a rush of breath, a rough, strangled sound, and then she burst into tears, head dropping into her hands.

—

Draco didn’t move for nearly a full minute. He knew because he watched the second hand on the clock behind her, ticking away every moment he did absolutely nothing as the most remarkable witch he’d ever met sat a cushion away from him bawling into her hands.

Then, as the second hand ticked past the twelve for a second time, he finally moved. From his cushion to the one between them, he closed the distance. She didn’t look up at him when he moved, but the intensity of her tears seemed to abate. Carefully, Draco reached out to place a hand on her knee, offering her some kind of comfort, some kind of apology, not that anything he could say would ever be anywhere near enough.

She flinched at his touch, and he immediately pulled his hand away. Of course, why would she want any comfort from him? He’d done this to her, after all.

He wasn’t prepared for her to launch herself into his arms, practically

crawling into his lap as she wrapped her arms around his neck, burying her face into his chest.

His breath stuttered, confusion mixed with a rush of desire he couldn't control, inappropriate and ill-timed as it may be. His response was automatic, one arm wrapping around her waist as the other smoothed her hair, curls already threatening to smother him. He could think of no finer way to go.

He couldn't help himself; he leaned against the top of her head, resting his cheek against the curls he'd known would be so, so soft, despite the frizz and the madness and the crackling magic that lived inside.

He realized, then, that she was blubbering, apologizing, against his chest.

"I'm sorry—I didn't mean, I'm sorry. I know this shirt is probably stupidly expensive. I—"

She started to pull away but he tightened his grip, hand on her back drawing circles against her shirt fabric. She melted into him again.

He watched the clock. She cried for another five minutes, on and off, surges of grief, or agony, or embarrassment, or melancholy, or whatever it was he'd caused her, surfacing in fresh bouts that flowed before they ebbed. When the space between gulps for breath and fresh tears became wide enough that her breathing felt almost normal against his ribs, he let his hand against her back slide away: space to leave if she wanted to.

She leaned back, looking up at him. Her knees bracketed his hips, quite literally straddling him. In any other circumstance that realization might have sent him spiraling, drunk with lust. But guilt overrode that carnal instinct, strong as it may be.

"I'm sorry," she said again, and he couldn't comprehend it. "That was just—so overwhelming, I'm sorry—"

"Why are you apologizing to me?" His words came out tight, snappish. She tensed, her thighs against his, and there was nothing sexual about it in the slightest. What a nightmare.

She wiped a tear from her cheek and waved vaguely in his direction.

"For your shirt," she said, as if it were obvious. "I've cried all over it."

He wondered why she hadn't removed herself from his person, but when he looked down, he saw that his hands rested on the top of her thighs, close to her hips, one smooth motion from her arse. He hadn't realized he'd done it, but he could hardly move them now, lest he draw attention to this unintentional slip in intimacy they ought not be sharing.

"I didn't mean to cry like that. I—tend to cry when I'm overwhelmed and that was, well. I never expected to have the option." She looked down at her left arm. "I'd accepted it. I was fine with it. Really, I was. You saw, what am I saying, of course *you* know. You probably know better than Harry and Ron. But, well. I—you're giving me a choice."

"Am I to surmise that you're *not* furious with me?"

"Furious? Why would I be furious?"

"It was rather presumptuous."

She seemed to consider that, consider him. One of her hands found his on the top of her thigh. She smiled.

"It's hardly your worst quality. For example, your propensity for hair straightening charms..."

A playful squeeze at her hip felt natural, smile breaking across his face as he pulled her closer, tighter against his lap. He did it before he'd even considered the consequences of having her so close. But she kept smiling at him, a faint pink spreading across the apples of her cheeks.

"I wanted you to have the option," he said, voice dropping. He could be quiet with his words; so close, they needn't travel very far. "When I saw you standing in the drawing room, back in April, accepting it. It was—honestly the most incredible thing I've ever seen. I started brewing that night."

That close, when her eyes widened, he saw not only a deep, expressive brown, but a mahogany blended with umber, swirled with chestnut, copper, russet, and bronze, as complex and confusing as the witch they belonged to.

"You've been working on an experimental potion"—a swallow—"since April?"

"I *really* wanted you to have the choice."

“Why?” She’d barely asked: a whisper.

“I think if anyone deserves to move on, fully move on, from—all that. It’s got to be Hermione Granger, doesn’t it?”

She sat close enough that when her eyes moved this time, a flick towards his own arm, his left arm, he didn’t miss that, either. She looked back at him a split second later, regret seeping from between streaks of copper and bronze inside her eyes. He didn’t mind, didn’t begrudge her for it. He hated the thing, too.

“Thank you, Draco,” she said. “Honestly. I’m speechless.”

He smirked, trying to force something normal, something simple, something easy, into a situation where Hermione Granger straddled his lap on an antique sofa in his flat. He’d wanted to far less than that.

“Speechless? Never thought I’d see the day.”

She rolled her eyes, smiling.

All the moments before that. All the errant impulses to touch or taste or kiss her. They all paled in comparison to this. Those moments contained barely a fraction of the want barreling through him with those lips, so close to his, stretched into a beautiful smile. It twisted inside him, pulling him apart at the seams, shredding every thread of self-control he thought he might have left.

“Granger,” he said.

“Hermione.”

“What?”

“If you’re going to kiss me, you should call me Hermione.”

He swallowed, panic strangling him. She’d just—said that, hadn’t she? He would have laughed at her Gryffindor tendencies if they hadn’t so utterly paralyzed him.

“You are, aren’t you?” she asked, an edge of self-consciousness creeping into her tone.

“Yes, I am,” he managed. He could taste his heartbeat, thudding against the back of his throat.

She slid a hand along the side of his neck, up into the back of his hair.

He closed his eyes, just for a moment, staving off a sensory overload.

She whispered his name, syllables he could inhale by proximity. He opened his eyes, long enough to orient himself, and brought their lips together in what he might have called an impulse had he not fantasized about it, wanted it for so long.

He pulled her closer, savoring the brief but staggering sensation of finally crossing the event horizon, slipping into a black hole together. The kiss flashed, fleeting, and ended far too soon. Warm, soft lips, lightning in his blood, relief on the surface of his skin. He held her against his chest, forehead against hers.

“Merlin,” he breathed, and saying it brushed their lips together again, giving him the distinct, erogenous pleasure of watching her eyelids flutter.

She leaned back, pulled away, and stood.

He absolutely had an erection and she *had* to have noticed. But she just kept staring at his face. He didn’t move, effectively melted into the sofa by a firestorm named Hermione Granger.

“I need to go,” she said.

And he agreed. If for no other reason than his self-control had already been ripped to tatters by an overwhelming want of her. She’d just cried for several minutes and then let him kiss her. Those things, they should not interact, overlap. He didn’t want finally knowing what it was like to kiss her to be tainted by a lingering sadness. He’d had one, brief and beautiful, and it would have to be enough for now.

She reached for the potion and her bag, pausing at the Floo. He could hear the heaviness in her breath.

“I was planning on going by myself,” she said. “But—if you’re available. I was wondering. I could use a date for Harry’s wedding—”

“Yes.”

He’d go to Harry Potter’s wedding ten times over if it meant going with her.

She smiled.

“Good. Ok. Yes, well. It’s just after the New Year. I’ll, um. I’ll owl you

the details.”

And before either of them could say—or do—anything else, she vanished through the Floo.

Draco wasn't entirely confident he had a perfect grasp on reality in the span of seconds after she'd left. But he was fairly certain he now had a date with Hermione Granger.

He watched the second hand on the clock again. It felt unreal, as if he'd stumbled into a formerly unknowable version of a future where Hermione had just straddled his lap and kissed him before asking him on a date.

He summoned the book she'd given him, almost entirely forgotten on the tabletop while he'd descended into a panic about his potion. He ripped the wrapping away and examined the cover.

The Count of Monte Cristo.

He'd never heard of it. Not altogether surprising; she'd said it was muggle. With a shrug, he flipped it open to find her name written inside the front cover. It was a child's penmanship, shaky and slow, but clearly done with care and precision. He could imagine her, a younger version of the woman he'd just had in his home, marking this book as her own, claiming the thing with her name.

He wondered where she'd written her name on his body, because she must have. She had to have done it, snuck her name on him somewhere, if the rush behind his ribs bore any indication.

Chapter End Notes

so many many thanks to all of you, as always! your encouragement means so much! and it genuinely helps motivate me to write even when the writing days are hard, so thank you!! i'm so blown away that this story is approaching 1,000 kudos...like my brain, it cannot comprehend. with this chapter, we are officially 1/4 of the way done already, can you believe it??? Part one, done. Three more to go!

i literally cannot thank [icepower55](#), [Endless_musings](#), and [persephone_stone](#) enough. it probably seems repetitive but it's so true! they have tirelessly helped my refine word choice and general weirdness and my egregious misuse of commas no matter how hard i try to get it right (i try, really i do). so here at the end

of part one, i just want to make sure it is super, duper, extremely clear that these ladies are fantastic and deserve so much credit for their support!

Chapter 13: -2.083, -2.166, -2.250

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Part Two: 2003

“And the way up is the way down, the way forward is the way back.

You cannot face it steadily, but this thing is sure,

That time is no healer: the patient is no longer here.”

— T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*, *The Dry Salvages*

—

January

tick tock

Inexplicably, Draco’s life shifted on a spectrum closer to a dream than a nightmare. No longer did so much of his existence feel like a cruel joke, an obstacle of fate, or a gauntlet meant to be endured. Rather, it had taken on an unreal quality: something lovely, like gossamer or lace, wrapping what might have been unpleasant, unbearable, with hope. He liked dreams. They could be fantastical, unbelievable, and yet feel so real. Unbeknownst to his better judgement, Hermione Granger had become his biggest, boldest dream.

Watching her step through his Floo in a beautiful cranberry-colored dress and not her usual work ensemble, felt a bit like he’d yet to wake from a fantastic dream. In what conscious state did Granger—Hermione—have any interest in spending time in public with the likes of him? And not just anywhere, but at Harry Potter’s wedding? Private as the event may be, it would still integrate Draco into the deepest parts of her personal life.

Their correspondence by owl had felt unreal, like an extended hallucination wherein Draco kept feeding treats to owls that delivered

letters to no one. Perhaps he only imagined Hermione's responses in return: coordinating attire, rendezvousing time and location, expressing cautious, impossible excitement. None of it felt real, not even when she entered his flat looking like an entirely unfamiliar version of herself, who smiled at him without suspicion, tucking a distractingly smooth curl behind her ear.

The dream-like quality in his living room crumbled when he saw her scar, fully on display because of her sleeveless dress. The blood drained from Draco's face, panic he'd been unprepared to face in the weightlessness of a dream.

"I'm sorry. I know," she said, right arm crossing her body to cover the scar. "I wanted—gods, this was probably a bad idea. But well, I decided to use your potion, but I wanted to do it with you. Should I not have? I'm so sorry."

He dropped his gaze, landing on her legs. He watched her calves twitch, kneecaps flexing, sliding over joints as her whole body seemed prepared to retreat, muscles poised to engage. The thought that she might not stay pulled him from an imminent spiral.

"You do not need to—ever—apologize to me for my inability to control my reaction to—it is *my* problem. Not yours. You should never have to—"

She sighed, stepping forward. "I thought perhaps we could both use it."

She glanced down at his left arm, covered by his sleeve, mark beneath it covered by a concealment charm that left a dark shadow staining his skin: never fully out of sight.

"No. It's for you."

"I'm sure there's enough. I thought perhaps—"

"No."

"Draco, you shouldn't have to constantly wear long sleeves and flinch when someone so much as looks at your arm."

"I do not flinch."

She raised a brow.

Panic and anger and guilt and shame roiled around inside his chest, a boiling sea bubbling out of control. He closed his eyes and took a breath, resisting the draw towards Occlumency. When he opened his eyes, he saw the potion in her hand. She looked nervous, worried, a finger tapping against the glass vial in a rapid, shaky pattern.

She wore makeup. Out of her norm. An effort.

This was meant to be a good day. A first date. A beginning.

“Hermione,” he said, walking to her, only taking the briefest of moments to marvel at the ease with which he’d been allowed into her personal space. He took the vial and held her hand, guiding her to the sofa. “I made this for you in large part because—you beat her.”

He sat beside her, angled so that his knees touched hers. He forced himself not to shy away from the scar, to face it just as she had. He unstoppered the vial.

“You won. You came to terms with it. You—could just live your life with it. I’m not”—he glanced at his sleeve—“I’m not there yet.”

He turned her hand over in his, exposing her forearm.

“May I?” he asked.

She nodded.

He let her arm rest against his leg as he tilted the vial, letting several drops of the lavender liquid drip onto his fingertips. He set the bottle down and held his breath, too afraid to look in her eyes. He traced the letters, one by one, letting the potion bind, separate, and eliminate the dark curse clinging to her skin.

He heard her intake of breath as the magic worked, glowing purple, not unlike her runes. Most iterations before he incorporated her diagnostic spells had leaned towards blues and greens. But this purple, with her diagnostic magic, felt safe, felt like healing.

He risked a look up at her when the glowing faded.

“It didn’t hurt,” she said, eyes blurry.

“I would have told you if it did.”

“I assumed, from your chest, that it must.”

“Those were bad versions.”

Her fingers tapped against the underside of his wrist.

“What now?” she asked, focus latched on her arm. Without knowing what had just transpired, one would assume her scar remained unchanged. But the invisible curse had been evicted, forcibly removed from her person, from her life.

His chest clenched—almost painful as his lungs and heart and sternum all vied to occupy the same, suddenly reduced space—at the idea that her diagnostic runes would stop identifying her as a vessel of dark magic. He stood.

“I have some scar paste. It will take care of the rest.”

And it did. Not five minutes later, and her arm bore no signs of the scar.

“I’m not going to cry again,” she said.

“It’s—alright. If you need to.”

She smiled at him, lips slightly parted as Draco tried to decide if that look of wonder could really be directed at him.

“I’m going to hug you.”

His laughter burst suddenly, unbidden, from some disbelieving part of himself that had slipped back into a dream with her.

“You sound like Theo.”

“He likes hugging you?”

“Mostly just announcing it. Evidently, I project an air of disinterest in physical affection.”

She hesitated, pulling her bottom lip between her teeth.

“Is it?” she asked. “A disinterest in physical affection? I wouldn’t want to make you—”

Merlin. His disinterest centered exclusively around the awkwardness of this conversation. He rolled his eyes, a strange, bold sensation clawing at his ribs.

“If it’s from you, Granger, I can guarantee there’s no disinterest. You may touch me whenever, and however, you like.”

Her lip slipped from her teeth’s hold as her face flushed. She stepped up to him, winding her arms around his torso, head pressed against his chest.

What a perfect fit.

She stood at just the right height; he could dip his head into her hair, suffocate in the scent of it, drop a brave kiss somewhere in the quagmire of it, twist his fingers in it.

His skin felt alive when they broke apart, buzzing and vibrating. So focused on how she’d somehow delivered such a thrum to his person, he barely heard her small laugh.

“You make me nervous,” she said, and he didn’t believe her for a moment. She shivered, a release of nervous energy he probably needed for himself. But something about it emboldened him. It seemed unbelievable that he might affect her in a similar way as she did him—with her hair and her lips and the story of her thoughts written across her face all day, every day.

“That’s ridiculous.”

“I agree.” She cracked a smile. “Are you ready?”

He reached for her, letting his hand trail down her fresh, unblemished skin before threading his fingers between her own.

“Take me on a date, Hermione.”

And, in an act of pure spontaneity bound to a sudden thrill of excitement, he winked at her, laugh welling, determined to have *fun*.

—

“You haven’t given me any kind of impassioned speeches about playing nice with a brood of Weasleys.”

They stood in the Burrow’s gardens, having made an inconspicuous arrival, mostly avoiding introductions and wary eyes. Hermione would

leave him soon to attend to her duties to the bride, whatever that entailed. Until then, they'd sequestered themselves in the magically blooming midwinter garden, sipping champagne and, to Draco's surprise, feeling strangely at ease despite the circumstances.

"Would you like me to?" she asked.

"Not necessarily. Just an observation."

"I've already told them all I was bringing you."

"And how did that go over?" He began a casual count of the number of redheads in sight: too many.

She rolled her eyes. "Not great. But not horrible. You didn't make an altogether terrible impression on my birthday. You'd earned a tiny bit of goodwill."

He almost snorted into his wine.

"I was nearly unconscious from occlusion."

She smiled, not saying anything, but he had a strong suspicion that if he tried anything similar during this wedding, she might hex him.

"When do you abandon me for the Weaslette?"

"You'll be fine." It wasn't an answer.

"Yes, the lone snake in a den of lions usually fares well."

"Not a lone snake." Hermione tilted her head towards a child emerging from a hydrangea bush, and the remarkably familiar looking woman wrangling him. She looked so very much like—

"Is that—my aunt?" His world felt unreal again, like a dream, to speak of an aunt and not have that mean Bellatrix. Draco had only ever seen his mother's other sister once in his life: during an unfortunate and accidental run-in at Diagon Alley. Coincidentally, it was also the only time Draco ever met his now-deceased cousin. He wasn't sure what he should feel now, seeing his first cousin, once removed, child of a cousin he didn't know, grandchild to an aunt he didn't know.

"I should have mentioned they would be here," Hermione said, her hand finding his arm. "I honestly didn't think about it. Harry is Teddy's godfather and...are you alright?"

“I—” Draco started, honestly unsure how to answer. He took a final sip of his champagne, downing the rest of it. He let the carbonation burn against his throat, a vitalizing kind of sting. When he looked back at Hermione, she watched him with wide eyes, an expressive umber with a wrinkle between her brows. “I think I’ll talk to her—to them.”

Hermione smiled. If it weren’t the middle of the day—and in plain view of several sets of Weasley eyes that would likely slip something in his food if he did it—Draco would have kissed that lovely curve in her lips. He certainly wanted to. In that moment, he felt like he’d stepped into a different world, where he had long-estranged family he might talk to and a brilliant, beautiful woman staring up at him, like she didn’t hate him and knew he didn’t hate her.

What *was* all this? Unbelievable, honestly. He leaned down, close to the side of her face, soft curls brushing against his cheek as he spoke against her ear.

“You are so lovely. Have I told you?” Bold fingers found her waist, not exactly a hug, more like a tentative, unmoving dance. He permitted himself one small brush of his lips just beneath her ear. He felt her shiver against his fingertips. He hovered in place: a fixed orbit.

“That’s not the last kiss I plan on giving you today.”

He hadn’t noticed that she’d wrapped her hand around his free wrist until her fingers tightened when he spoke. They stayed like that, unmoving, much longer than necessary for a simple exchange of whispered words.

There was nothing simple about this exchange at all.

This exchange had been lit on fire.

Unsuccessfully doused by reality.

Still blazing.

“I hope it’s not,” she said. He couldn’t resist digging his fingertips into her waist, possessiveness ignited by her words. He pulled away to look into her eyes, close enough that if he wanted to give in and kiss her right then and there, it would have taken barely any movement at all.

“Go do your job, Granger. I’ll be around when you’re done.”

“So, a normal day, then?”

He laughed and stepped away, requiring space lest he ruin any chance he might have at actually romancing her.

With distance, he saw she'd flushed a beautiful shade of pink. He could see himself losing track of all sense of time trying to discover all the things that made her blush. She let out a quiet laugh, shaking her head.

She met his eyes, mouth slightly agape, like she might say something, like there were words there to be spoken, but she swallowed them back. With a rush of pride, Draco gave into the impulse to smile, rather liking the idea that he'd rendered Hermione Granger speechless. She laughed again, another shake of her head, a deeper flush, and then she left, presumably to find the Weaslette. Because there was a wedding to be had. That was meant to be the most important thing happening, not the hostage situation happening inside his chest.

—

Draco had no experience with children. Apart from when he was one, he could scarcely imagine a time when he'd ever even engaged with a child, which made approaching an unknown four—five?—year old a sufficiently intimidating task. But as he watched Teddy tear through the gardens, carving a warpath through gardenias and gladiolas and geraniums, Draco saw the opportunity to introduce himself. Andromeda caught his eye from a distance, a knowing sort of smirk on her face: one he'd seen his mother wear in the past. She gestured towards where Teddy had run off, closer to Draco than to her, and apparently, an opportunity to connect.

Well, that seemed irresponsible. She didn't know Draco from an ogre, not really. But with a second pointed gesture and raised brow, reminding him so sharply of Narcissa that he almost did a double-take, he steeled himself and made his way towards a wildly overgrown rosemary plant.

The bush rustled.

Draco tilted, bending to peek under the plant, and found a pair of grey

eyes staring back at him from beneath a shock of bright blond hair. Draco didn't move or speak, stunned by a mirror through time. Then the eyes changed, a golden brown. The hair changed too, morphing into a sandy dark blond.

Right. His cousin had been a metamorphmagus. And the magic evidently passed by blood.

"That's quite the trick," Draco said, hoping desperately that he didn't sound like an idiot. How were adults meant to speak to children?

"Your hair is fun," Teddy said.

Huh.

Draco's mouth twitched, a tug towards a self-satisfied smirk. He crouched.

"Thank you. I rather like it, as well. What—ah, what are you doing under there?"

"Hiding."

Draco snorted.

"Obviously. Care to elaborate?"

Teddy's attempt at parroting the word elaborate did not end in success: warbled syllables stuck on a stuttering 'b.'

"Sorry, it means explain. Why are you hiding?"

"Grandmother told me there would be vegetables."

"A horror."

Teddy's face broke into an enormous smile.

"And I'm bored."

"Understandable. Weddings are dull."

Teddy's smile spread even wider.

Draco looked up from his crouch at the sound of a new voice, melodic and refined in a familiar, uncanny way. "I cannot say I expected to see my sister's son at Harry Potter's wedding."

Teddy shifted further beneath the rosemary bush, finger lifted in front of his lips in a *shhing* action, eyes wide as if his hiding place hadn't already been found out. Draco offered him a conspiratorial wink before rising to his feet.

"Aunt Andromeda," he said. She had the same hard edges in her face that his mother did, slender with angles that could cut as quick and deep as glass. But her eyes were softer, less calculating. When she smiled at him, it steered clear of evaluation in a way his mother's smile rarely did.

"How are you, Draco?"

Teddy emerged from beneath the rosemary before Draco had the opportunity to answer, which conveniently saved him from weaving together a response to such a remarkably loaded question.

"Aunt?" Teddy asked, tugging at Andromeda's deep blue sleeve. "Did he call you aunt?"

Andromeda smoothed her fingers through Teddy's sandy waves.

"Yes, sweetheart. This is Draco. He's your cousin."

Teddy did not look convinced, tiny features narrowing and pinching in suspicion.

"I've never had a cousin."

"Technically you've always had one, sweetheart. We haven't seen him in"—her eyes met Draco's—"many years."

"Oh," Teddy said with a kind of settling, simple acceptance. In one large step, Teddy detached himself from Andromeda's sleeve and hooked his arms around Draco's waist in a sudden and unexpected hug.

Draco lifted a hand and, feeling ridiculous, offered Teddy a pat on the top of his head. Andromeda sniggered across from him in a way Narcissa would have deemed highly unbecoming, in private or public.

"Teddy, why don't you see if you can find Victoire? I believe I saw her mother a moment ago."

In a continuation of the whirlwind Draco had already witnessed, Teddy broke away, excitement stretching his mouth and eyes wide.

And then he was gone, tearing through more flowers in search of someone named Victoire.

“It’s difficult to keep him still,” Andromeda said, eyes following Teddy’s trail before landing back on Draco. A beat passed between them, sounding of what might have been a shared history, silenced by circumstance. “How is Narcissa?”

There were many things Draco might have responded with, ranging from *very well thanks* to *a bit of a shut-in*, but the stream of words that spilled from his mouth sought an inkling of familiarity, of family that might *know* and *understand* in a way few else could even begin to comprehend.

“Brought low, but not broken, according to her.”

The grimace, the distaste, the disappointment: it was all implied. Placed at Andromeda’s feet for her to pick up, and she did.

She nodded. “I had hoped...” she said, trailing off. “But—I did not expect it. And you?”

“Closer to broken.”

“Broken can be fixed.”

Draco let his gaze wander, seeking chestnut curls and a cranberry dress.

“You’re here with Hermione Granger,” Andromeda continued, far from a question.

Draco nodded, strangely at ease with a woman he’d only met once in his life, whom he was meant to despise for her choices. Those choices looked far less damning up close, free of fog and fear.

“You know there’s only one way loving a Muggleborn ends in our world, don’t you?”

His halfhearted attempts to spot Hermione in a crowd ceased before Andromeda had even finished her question, eyes snapping back to her: blue like Narcissa’s. The implied advice, on the surface, looked quite similar, too.

“This is only a first date,” he said. “It’s new—it’s, hardly love.”

She smiled with a kind of warm, pitying understanding that tensed

Draco's back, muscles rebelling under scrutiny.

"I'm willing to forgo the obvious rebuttal that Harry Potter's wedding is much more than a first date sort of outing."

Draco pressed his lips together, biting back what he already knew would be unsuccessful objections.

"My point remains," she said. "It's relevant caution I received for myself once upon a time."

"Things were different then. My family—they can change."

The force of saying *they*, and not *we*, struck him in the silence after he said it. The tiny lift in Andromeda's brows told him she had heard it, too.

"But will they?"

"They—already have, some. A bit." A very small, almost imperceptible bit that mostly involved the exclusion of slurs from their vocabulary when speaking with Ministry officials.

"Enough?"

"They just need time."

"We all do, darling. Sometimes there's not enough of it. Not for everyone."

—

The ceremony was—fine. Draco probably ought to call it understated, if he were going for the most socially-acceptable description. Proletariat felt more apt. But he didn't linger on such distinctions as he let his hand hover at the base of Hermione's spine. His fingers ever-so-barely grazed the fabric there as she led him towards the happy couple.

She glanced back at him. A furtive, sneak of a look before she immediately redirected her gaze ahead.

"Is this where I get my speech about playing nice?" he teased, dipping

his head to breathe the question in her ear. “I did manage to sit through an entire ceremony next to a Weasley.”

She rolled her eyes, still determinedly looking ahead and away from him.

“Angelina is only a Weasley by marriage, and I heard you talking about Quidditch. I doubt it was much of a burden for you.”

“Still a Gryffindor though. And you know how those upset my delicate constitution.”

He savored her smirk, the tiny quirk at the corner of her mouth. He planned to learn how those smirks tasted, how they differed from her hidden smiles, her grins, even her frowns and her grimaces. He would endeavor to know how each shape of her mouth felt against his own. And if he could just escape the constant cloud of Weasleys by birth, Weasleys by marriage, and Weasleys by association, he might take a shot at doing just that. But as it stood, he still suffered in the thick of it.

“Have you forgotten who your date is?” she asked over her shoulder, winding through a particularly thick hoard of red hair and freckles. Circumventing the space set aside for dancing, straight by the assortment of drinks and hors d'oeuvres, he followed her towards where the newly minted Mister and Missus Potter stood surrounded by friends and family.

He indulged in a single stroke of his finger along her lower spine, enough to pull her attention back to him. Not that he wanted to delay the inevitable of having to speak to Potter. That certainly had no bearing on his attempt at distraction.

“I haven’t forgotten,” he said. “I’m just immune to your especially offensive Gryffindor qualities at this point. It’s a hazard of long-term exposure.”

In the middle of the reception, he wished he could pull her close and not feel like a public oddity on display. Even under the cover of relative darkness as the sun set over The Burrow, the suspicious glances cast in his direction did not go unnoticed. She smiled up at him, another shape made by her lips for the catalogue he planned to build with his tongue.

“Yes, the exposure has certainly helped educate me on the fascinating intersection between sincerity and snark from a Slytherin.”

He risked the scandal and reached for a curl; it wasn't as if the other guests didn't *know* he was her date. He just hadn't felt especially generous about giving them gossip fodder. He wound the spiral around his knuckle, counting just how long he could get away with it.

"Just," she started, reaching up, grasping his hand and pulling it down. The curl stretched, then bounced as it slid off his finger. She kept his hand firmly in her own and it felt like he'd somehow tricked her into a compromise in which he got to hold her hand in front of all these people: only about half of whom looked like the sight unsettled their stomachs. "Table the snark? Just in case it tries to make an appearance."

He couldn't resist the laugh.

"You're saying I shouldn't greet the bride with an insult on her wedding day? Well—so long as I can greet her with an insult every *other* day."

Hermione's mouth pulled together, stifling the laughter he suspected she refused to reward him with. She released a deep breath through her nose and opened her mouth to say something. He preempted her.

"I'm not offended you had to say it at least once. Due diligence and all that," he said, a slight squeeze of her hand in his, encouragement to continue their path to the Potters. "In fact, I wouldn't be surprised if you got roped into a promise."

He leaned close again. "Is that the case, Granger? Did an uncivilized herd of redheads bully you into promising you'd keep your exceptionally attractive, but unknown element of a date in line?"

"I can't imagine why they'd think that necessary."

"Nor can I."

She pulled him forward the last few steps required to come face to face with the bride and groom. Hermione broke from his grip and offered Potter a hug in greeting, leaving Draco standing directly in front of the she-weasel with nothing to do.

She raised a very ginger brow at him: a dare if he ever saw one. A trap, too. One he'd have to avoid if Draco ever planned on having another date with Hermione. He was saved from a dangerously tempted tongue when Hermione swept Ginny into a hug as well.

Draco gathered his courage, took what was likely too audible a deep breath, and stepped up to Potter. He extended his hand and, for a moment, felt transported in time, an echo of a scene he'd lived before: one without a happy ending. A handshake offered; a handshake rejected. A path set into motion that would define years of their lives, whole swaths of time. Draco forced his jaw to unclench and looked directly into Potter's green, bespectacled, infuriating eyes.

"Congratulations, Potter."

He half expected Potter not to accept his handshake, continuity maintained, a perfect echo, a cycle—broken with a quick grip, a single up and down movement, and the words: "Thanks, Malfoy."

Tempting as it was, Draco decided an emotional unravelling in the middle of Harry Potter's wedding wasn't the most ideal course of action, regardless of the small storm tearing his ribs to shreds by way of vindication, of *closure*.

Was this what moving on felt like? Was this how one grew out of one's past and into their future? If Draco ended up waking in his bed and discovering this had all been a dream, he would be extremely displeased with his subconscious.

Hermione's hand slipped into his, tugging him away from where he'd stared far too long at Potter. He looked at her, pride swelling in the apples of her cheeks. He saw it in the way starlight reflected in her eyes, in her grip on his hand, as if to say she did not plan on letting it go. He'd be happy to live and die by that look of pride, knowing that he'd pleased her.

Warmth filled him from the soles of his shoes to the carefully maintained charms in his hair. He led her to the dance floor; he pulled her close, and he danced with Hermione Granger like it didn't matter that his existence partially scandalized half the guests. When he spun her, he realized the storm in his chest had strengthened to a hurricane. And it had a name: hers.

—

"There aren't enough cushioning charms in the world to save my feet from the damage you've done, dancing me half to death."

He walked with her on his arm, a slow pace through the gardens, moon high in the sky as the celebration wound down.

“Can you blame me? What if this was my only opportunity to dance with you?”

Her hold on his arm tightened, just by a fraction.

“I highly doubt this will be your only opportunity.”

“Oh?” he asked, stopping them somewhere in the middle of the herbs, fragrant with rosemary and lavender, a hint of sage and mint. “I suppose I *was* fairly well behaved. Surely that warrants another date.”

“I might even go so far as to call you tame.”

“Let’s not.”

He turned towards her, letting one arm slide around her waist, the other finding the side of her face, thumb brushing against the round curve of her cheek. It felt so easy, so natural, tangling himself up with her.

“This was nice,” she said, quiet so as not to disturb the moon and the stars and the many reasons why the next few minutes could be a very bad idea. “Thank you for coming. I enjoyed spending time with you—especially, well, anywhere that’s not the manor.”

He smiled. “Who’d have thought it, Granger?”

“I thought we’d agreed you were calling me Hermione, now.” She pushed.

“I am, mostly. But some habits—I think of you rather fondly as Granger.”

She smiled, too, so close.

“Who would have thought?” she echoed. “I wouldn’t have.”

“And you’re alright with it?”

She swallowed, a nod, her gaze dipping to his mouth. “Very.”

He took a half step closer, the entire line of her body flush with his, cranberry-colored fabric cushioned under his palms. A pull.

His question was nearly silent, not even the herbs could hear him. Only her.

“Can I kiss you now, Granger?”

She nodded, an equally near-silent yes breathed straight through him. Draco resisted the shudder that shot down his spine as her hands skated up the front of his robes, far too light a touch for his liking, before they wound around his neck, threading through his hair.

He bent, already so close. Eliminating the distance between them required barely any movement at all. But he didn't close the gap completely, maintaining enough space between his lips and hers to trade secrets he'd never dare risk the rest of the world hearing.

He placed a barely-there peck at the corner of her mouth.

“I have a suspicion,” he whispered against her skin, every ounce of his self-control screaming for more. Fingers pressing against her dress, heart hammering, breath heavy.

He shifted, dropping a kiss at the other corner of her mouth. His grip on her waist tightened, anchoring her in place as he felt her impatient movement start to swell, like she wanted more, too.

Good. She could want as much as she liked. She could wait, just like him.

“That you'll be my undoing,” he continued. A greedy *want* of her clawed at his ribs, demanding to know her, to have her.

He moved again, another fleeting kiss at the center of her bottom lip. He swallowed the pitch of her frustrated sound, transmuting it into his own chuckle.

“Could I be yours?”

A breath and a blink.

“Yes.”

Her agreement tasted like caramel apple, like satin ribbons, like waiting he barely knew he'd been doing.

He gave her his breath and took hers in exchange, bridging the last gap between them and savoring the spark that shot through his lips, his jaw, his neck, straight down his spine, to the very tips of his toes.

Kissing Hermione was nothing like he expected.

He expected warmth and lust and the familiar softness of a woman's pliant lips: lovely and pleasant and a stepping stone to *more*. He did not expect warmth that raged like fire, lust that cracked inside his bones, and lips that felt like the destination he'd sought for so long. If he only ever got to kiss her, that would be enough; he wouldn't mind in the slightest, not as he swallowed the sound of her delicate, satisfied sigh.

The garden: bursting with herbs and vegetables, fruit and flowers. The burrow: overrun with Weasleys, both natural born and married in. The sky: idyllically clear and sparkling with stars on a January night. The ground: solid confirmation that the world still had shape, form.

Her skin: prickling with gooseflesh, independent of the winter chill held at bay by warming charms. No, the sensitive flushing beneath his fingers—rising as he trailed his hand up her bare arm and buried it in her hair—belonged to him. *He* did that to her.

He smiled against her mouth as her hands pulled at his robes, bringing them closer together than was decent, even for a dark, secluded garden.

He pulled her bottom lip between his teeth, finally taking it for himself after so many months watching her do the same. Her whimper speared him, a jolt towards urgency, a spiraling loss of control as a new fog enveloped him, knowing nothing of war or Occlumency.

He groaned, the sound smothered by her mouth, as her nails dragged against the back of his neck, messing his hair. He flexed a possessive hand at her waist, exploring her ribs, sliding back to her spine, counting shivers with her vertebrae. He couldn't breathe, lungs desperate for air as every other instinct told him he could go without, that his only focus ought to be the sweet sounds he could draw from Hermione's throat.

His chest burned, lips on fire. He delved deeper, harder, more frantic: a taste of tongues and spiralling tension.

He broke: a gasp of air and the words "*Merlin, Granger,*" tumbling from his mouth. He followed the syllables with his lips, back to hers, then dipping to her jaw, her throat, dragging his teeth and tongue against the soft skin there. He nibbled, sucked, utterly overcome by a need to mark her, to claim her as his own, because *fuck* if he didn't want her for himself. Her head tipped back, offering a feast for him to

explore and consume.

Her hands fell from his neck, skating across his chest. He could feel her breathing, heavy and labored against him, still pressed so close. He peppered more kisses along her neck, letting his own hand at her spine slip lower, kneading her arse and pulling her hips forward.

He matched the strangled sound wrenched from her throat with his own groan, mouth finding hers again, abandoning his attentions on her neck. He brushed his tongue against hers once more, nearly debilitated by the force of desire driving him to hold her so close that he could feel the expansion of her ribs against his own.

Part of him—a small, distant part—had wondered about compatibility, about how much of his draw towards her had been imagined, an effect of forced proximity over so many months. But this—this was certainly *something*. This felt very much like prophecy, delivered by Andromeda mere hours before. Something about where this would go.

The kiss slowed, a cautious descent from staggering heights, with nips and breathless praises. He brushed a thumb against her cheek, warm to his touch.

This path had a single destination. And, in his own version of prophecy: it would be his undoing.

Chapter End Notes

i want to wish a happy early birthday (which is a sentiment i hope i can pull off a little smoother than poor draco!) to jessica! i hope tomorrow is a lovely, wonderful day! <3

also, THANK YOU to everyone reading along, commenting, kudos'ing, tumblr'ing, and discording with me. y'all are seriously the greatest and you make this experience so special for me!! i can't tell you how much i value and appreciate all the kindness y'all are spreading! i'm truly overwhelmed by the response to monday's chapter. please accept my eternal love and adoration!

what would my author's notes be without a mention of the hard work put in by [icepower55](#), [Endless_musings](#), and [persephone_stone](#) to polish this bad boy into something resembling a coherent story. thank you all so, so much!

Chapter 14: -2.000, -2.083, -2.166

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

February

tick tock

Being on kissing terms with Hermione Granger involved far less kissing than Draco preferred. Mostly, it involved watching her work while wanting to kiss her and being told that no, there would be no kissing because she was being paid by the Ministry to perform a task.

So bloody responsible all the time.

It had started driving him mad.

He parted from her after Potter's wedding more drunk on the memory of her mouth than the champagne he'd consumed. Days later, when she walked through the Floo to resume her work on the manor, that comfortable warmth chilled in their awkward reintroduction.

"We shouldn't—be friendly. While I'm working," she'd said, avoiding eye contact as she stood by the fireplace.

He smirked, taking a cautious step forward. He could be forgiven for one tiny breach of professional sensibilities, couldn't he? Once he stepped close enough, into her orbit, it was like an *accio* drew him the rest of the way. He trailed his fingers up her arm, across her shoulder, along her neck, before winding them into her hair. It felt familiar, natural, like he'd done it a thousand times and not just the once. He dropped his head, voice low, still smirking as he savored what sounded like a very reluctant hitch in her breath.

"Friendly? You snog many of your friends?"

"You know what I mean," she said, her arms winding around his torso. He hadn't exactly planned on trying to seduce her in the parlor on her first day back, but the idea suddenly held a tremendous amount of merit. "You're being intentionally distracting," she continued.

She ducked, slipping beneath his arm and stepping around him.

"I need to work when I'm here," she said. "None of that." She waved vaguely in his direction.

"None of what?"

Annoyed as he was by the distance she'd put between them, he preened at the unspoken compliment.

She tapped her foot several times before answering, either uncertain if she should or not knowing how.

"All of it," she finally said. "Just—all of it."

And that moratorium on *all of it*, which he discovered upon subsequent admonishments, included: maintaining eye contact too long, lingering too close, smiling too wide, and thinking too loudly about how he wanted to bend her over the nearest horizontal surface and fuck her senseless, endured day in and day out.

He'd been right about his suspicions that she planned her life to its far edges. She planned time for him to kiss and hold and otherwise woo her into a schedule packed with productivity, and a small circle of social engagements. His time with her mostly boiled down to Saturdays, as she had Sundays reserved for her parents or Gryffindor friends, depending on the week. He could occasionally steal a weekday kiss, in the evenings after her work was done, his body pressed flush to hers against the fireplace, or the paneled parlor door, or whatever other vertical surface was nearest to them. But always in the parlor and behind closed doors.

"Your parents don't know about this, do they?" she asked in early February. He'd been toying with the idea of slipping his hand beneath the hem of her shirt as he kissed her. Those dreams evaporated at the thought of his parents.

He pulled away, cradling her face and dropping kisses along her jaw. He tried to drag himself out of the haze that enveloped his brain whenever his mouth neared her skin.

"No," he began, already fearing the direction this line of questions could travel. "They don't."

"That's good, I think," she said, shifting her body against his, breasts pushed against his chest in a way that made a conversation involving

his parents painfully inconvenient.

His brows furrowed, trying to divine meaning from her look. Was it actually good? It felt suspiciously like a trap, like the sort of lure Lucius would sometimes leave with the intent of coaxing an opinion out of Draco that he ought not possess.

She lifted her hand, running it through his hair. The woman had a vendetta against his smoothing charms. Nevertheless, he leaned into the touch.

“I don’t imagine they’d be pleased—with me.”

He watched her with curiosity. She sounded so clinical, so divorced from emotion. He might have believed her if he couldn’t feel the way her heart beat against his own chest.

“I—no, I don’t think they would,” he said. He saw no point in a lie.

“It’s probably best that—you don’t have to deal with that,” she said. “Especially after your betrothal, don’t you think?”

She kissed him; it felt like an apology. And when she pulled away, lips lingering close to his, he didn’t know if he should speak. He didn’t know what response she wanted from him and he had no interest in being incorrect.

“That’s”—a pause as he stumbled to find neutrality—“very logical.”

“I’m very logical.”

On the surface, that answer sounded *correct*. It didn’t feel *right*.

“I’m not ashamed of you,” he added, chest tightening in discomfort, of feeling laid bare and left on display.

She sighed. “Would you like to go tell them, then?”

His fingers flexed against her hip, other hand brushing against her cheek.

He hesitated too long. He closed his eyes, forehead pressed against hers, a slip of a kiss away from her mouth. Any moment now, she would pull away from him, separate their limbs and lips and lingering affections, disgust and disappointment evident on her face. He’d failed the test, sprung the snare.

“I didn’t think so,” she said. “I don’t find I especially want to, either. I don’t expect you to blow up your life for me.”

He didn’t open his eyes, stuck in the darkness behind his closed lids, wondering how on earth he could ever possibly deserve someone willing to give him that level of understanding. She should be mad. She should be furious. He was upset on her behalf that he didn’t have the will to march up to his parents and tell them that he spent most of his supervisory duties fantasizing about what Granger might look like underneath her frustratingly professional workwear.

In short: he definitely did not deserve her.

Eyes still closed, he dove for another kiss. He was selfish; he might not deserve her, but that did nothing to dampen his want.

—

The guest wing looked different this time around. Six months ago, it looked like an indistinct threat, reasonably menacing, and an inconvenience Draco didn’t want to deal with.

Now, it looked like acute danger, a film of concern for Hermione’s well-being overriding every other opinion he might have about it. But she insisted it was time, that she’d avoided it for far too long and that her *job* required she be thorough: every hall, every room, every crevice, every cranny. No matter that the first room she’d stepped into last time left her with a blood curse and trip to St. Mungo’s.

And an accidental date with him, but Draco wasn’t allowed to be pleased about that bit.

Or was he?

“Hermione?”

She stood next to him, staring down the hallway with more wariness than when she’d first tried to tackle it, but still significantly less concern for his liking.

She looked up at him, a soft smile on her face. He still expected suspicion sometimes, forgetting the trust that came with his newfound

familiarity with the sounds she could make if he nibbled on her neck *just so*.

"I'd like to help," he said.

She turned more fully, facing him.

"Help?"

"With this hall. I—well, I wouldn't mind having a part in dismantling whatever terrible shit still lives here and"—she would think him ridiculous—"I'd like for you to have the help, from me. I don't know if I can just sit around expecting something to hurt you again. I think I'll go mad."

He braced for indignation. For annoyance.

But her smile softened even more.

"You aren't trained in—"

"I'm familiar with it, though," he rushed to say. "From my family and from association. And you taught me the diagnostics. I'll listen to you, I won't—be a bother. Please, Hermione—"

He turned to face her, too, finally tearing his eyes away from the door she'd entered once before, perfectly unharmed, and exited with a blood curse. He lifted a hand, tucking a curl behind her ear, knowing it was a futile act and that the curl would spiral, exploding free at the first shift in Hermione's center of gravity. He did it for no other reason than the opportunity to wind it around his knuckle, sliding the soft strands against his finger before he finally tucked it behind her ear, finger trailing down her neck.

"Hermione," he said, leaning closer, voice low, already pushing his luck by engaging in so much obvious touch. Regardless of the mandates that Lucius and Narcissa stay away from her work, it still felt so visible, like they might be seen at any moment. "You'd get to boss me around. Doesn't that sound like fun?"

She pursed her lips, trying to smother her growing smile. Of course it sounded like fun. Hermione Granger, at her core, liked telling people what to do when she knew better. Honestly, she should be asking him for the honor of having his assistance.

He pressed the pad of his thumb to the center of her bottom lip, trying

to free her repressed smile. She narrowed her eyes, parting her mouth slightly, tongue grazing his thumb. Her mouth softened, but didn't shift into a smile. Instead, it dropped further open, warm breath heating his thumb. Her tongue hovering a fraction too far. If he pushed his thumb forward, past her pretty little lips, he wondered what she'd do. Would she let her tongue graze him again? Would she close her lips around it? Warm and wet and—

He let his hand drop, trying to ignore the throb of his pulse beneath his skin and the tiny almost-noise of disappointment she made at the loss of contact. For as much as she protested that they must maintain professional boundaries, moments like this, few and far between as they were, told him of a willingness to throw caution to the wind with the right incentive.

“Is that a yes, then? I promise to be very helpful.”

She closed her mouth, muscles at the side of her jaw flexing.

“Fine,” she relented. “But you have to do whatever I say.”

—

No wonder she'd been cursed. The first of nine rooms in the guest hall was a veritable nightmare that bore far too much resemblance to the room of hidden things for his liking. Debris littered the dark space, curtains pulled tight over the windows. What might tentatively be labeled as furniture remains lay in shards and shambles all over the floor. It looked like the room had once been occupied by a bedroom set, judging by the bits of mattress he saw poking out of what essentially amounted to a pile of trash. The whole room had the distinct air of a *reducto*, or several. It had been wrecked, utterly so. By whom, he had no idea. But there was barely space to stand beyond the threshold without encountering a splinter of broken wood, or what looked like the gears from a clock, or the upended remnants of a chess table.

“You remember the incantation?” she asked, conjuring her diagnostics. The dark, disassembled space glowed suddenly with more red than Draco had ever seen the runes display.

Hermione let out a small sigh.

"I do," he said, conjuring his own. "I used it quite a bit, trying to break it apart for the potion."

"Just—observe for today, okay? I'll walk you through what I'm doing, but please be careful."

"I'm the one who's worried about you, remember?"

"Well, the feeling is mutual."

"Is it?" he asked, unable to help himself, voice dropping low.

She glanced up at him, face glowing bright red from the warning runes.

She swallowed before she spoke. "Very much so."

If not for the fact that they stood in a ransacked room that could potentially kill them in several different ways, he might have kissed her then, schedule be damned.

She took a step towards a collapsed bookcase and a pile of books because *of course* that's where she would start.

He grabbed her arm.

"Wait, Hermione—you can't just—" He gestured towards the floor, at the splinters and glass and gears scattered everywhere. "Be careful where you step."

"I can't properly evaluate the bookcase from here, Draco."

"Shouldn't we reassemble the room first? Get the debris off the floor. What if something curses you again?"

"If I reassemble the room, I run the risk of increasing the power of some of the curses. They're easier to dismantle in their constituent parts."

"But—"

"You're supposed to do what I say, remember?"

"Well, start with the stuff on the floor, then."

"My runes would tell me if they were a problem."

He growled in frustration. She sounded so casual, so flippant. She'd been *cursed* in this room once before.

"First, how can you tell? Mine aren't—I don't know. They aren't telling me anything at all. And second, they aren't perfect, right? You got hurt last time."

She shifted her weight out of the half step she'd taken, moving towards him again. Lifting her wand, she cancelled his runes. He made a noise to protest but stopped at the sight of her raised brow and unamused stare.

"*First*," she mimicked. "I've told you there's intuitive magic involved. It takes time to learn. And second, no, it's not perfect. But part of this job is accepting risk. I've done probably a third of the manor now, haven't I? Barely any incidents."

"*Barely any incidents* is a poor method of self-preservation. Oh, just barely any death. It only takes one, Granger."

"Sometimes the best self-preservation is none at all. Sometimes you just have to dive in, be bold."

"Be a Gryffindor, you mean. Honestly, it's astonishing any of you live into adulthood if that's your philosophy on life."

"Draco," her voice had a sharp quality to it, cutting through the first syllable in his name, but her eyes remained soft, almost pleading. "I know how to do my job."

"I know."

"So let me."

"It sounds a lot like you're hoping luck will work in your favor, Hermione. And that's so contrary to your logical"—he waved his hand at her—"everything. It doesn't make sense."

"People don't always make sense."

He snorted.

"Well that's obvious. You make no sense."

She tilted her head, looking up at him.

"As if you're so easy to figure out, Draco Malfoy."

He might have asked her what that meant if the door behind them hadn't slammed shut, drowning them in darkness.

"Oh," was all she said in the dark. Her runes had vanished.

He tried conjuring his own; they glowed weak and dim. In the faint red light around them he saw Granger draw her wand and cancel his spells again.

"What are you—"

"Don't use your magic," she said, voice calm and controlled but very, very serious.

He didn't say anything; he didn't use any more magic. He simply waited for her to elaborate, finally following her instructions without question.

"It's likely a security curse. Not especially common. It measures the amount of magic used and starts dampening it if the correct security measures aren't followed." He heard her sigh in the darkness. "I would have found it if—"

"I hadn't been conjuring my own runes and distracting you?"

"Yes."

"Well, don't soften the blow for me."

"You're a big boy, Malfoy; you can handle it. Speaking of handles, don't touch the door. It'll have fresh wards."

Draco shifted in place, a sense of shrinking descending upon him, like he couldn't move in any direction for fear of danger.

"What—what do we do now?" he asked.

She sighed again.

"I was able to disarm the other two I've come across—"

“There have been more of these curses here?” Draco asked, dying to reach out and touch her. But in the darkness, which he realized now had an unnatural pervasiveness, an artificiality to it, he’d lost track of exactly how far she stood from him.

“It would make sense that the same person cast them. Do you know who stayed in this room?”

“No—I tried not to come here. Only high ranking Death Eaters stayed at our estate though. This wasn’t Aunt Bella’s room, that’s on the next floor. Not *his*, either.”

He wondered if he ought not to have brought up his deranged aunt while a cursed, pitch-black room held them captive.

“Theo has access to the manor’s wards, right?”

“Yes, why—”

“I’m going to send him a Patronus. Ask him to find Harry. He knows how to handle this type of security trap. I actually did a lot of curse breaking training with the auror division.”

“If the room is dampening magic—will a Patronus work?”

Hermione considered her response longer than he would have liked.

“I certainly hope so. It’s my only idea.”

Draco waited, unsure if he should try offering encouragement or simply let her do her job as she’d requested of him since the beginning.

When she finally cast the spell, a bright, silvery otter burst from the tip of her wand. He couldn’t help but marvel as she gave it directions. It danced around the room before leaving, swimming around his shoulders. In the shifting white light it radiated, he could see Hermione smiling up at him. And then it vanished, popped straight through the closed door, dousing them in darkness again.

It had provided enough light that he knew where she stood, knew the exact distance. He reached blindly and found her, pulling her into his arms.

Draco might have enjoyed himself, holding Hermione flush against his body in the dark, if not for the looming threat of cursed objects surrounding them.

In the dark, her hair smelled more strongly of vanilla, and of other, more subtle things, too: amber, orchids, bourbon. Warm, comforting scents, sharply reminiscent of the short span of days when summer croaked and groaned, becoming autumn.

He could hear her tiny huffs of breath against his chest: in and out, every few seconds, a rhythm of frustration punctuating the darkness.

“You breathe rather loudly,” he said, mostly for something to say before the silence and the darkness fully swallowed them up. His desire to cast a *lumos* battered at his wand hand: an instinct to cast light where there was dark.

“Sorry,” she said. “I’m a little anxious. I’ve never actually triggered one of these before.”

“I thought we agreed that was my doing?”

He tightened his arms around her. He felt her head tilt upwards against him, probably trying to see something, anything, in the unnatural darkness.

“I have told you before you’re very distracting.”

She had no idea. If she found him distracting, then there simply wasn’t a word for what she did to him. He’d had to resort to Occlumency for the vast majority of a year just to manage the unbelievable distraction she caused him.

Her fingers shifted, skating along his sides in a wandering exploration.

“You know, you probably didn’t even need to request Theo bring Potter—Theo could break through these wards on his own.”

Her fingers paused, more pressure against his side. He felt her chest expand against his, followed by the sound of a breath.

“I realize Theo is—industrious. But ward breaking is a part of Harry’s job—”

“And it could probably be Theo’s job, too, if the Ministry would hire anyone with Death Eater connections.”

She sank into him, resignation weighed against his ribs.

Draco continued, “He’s been dismantling ancient Nott wards in his spare time for over four years, trying to break into his family vault. He—invents things, all kinds of things. And he’s been rejected by just about every department at the Ministry.”

She’d gone still; even her breathing had quieted.

“I didn’t know that.”

“I think it bothers me more than him. He’s brilliant in his own—Theo kind of way. And he has way too much free time. He wasn’t even marked, and he still can’t get a job.”

“Well at least he doesn’t need one, though?”

Draco stiffened.

“That’s not—the point.”

“I know, it’s just. Well, I suppose it could be worse, is what I mean. At least he doesn’t need the money.”

Draco’s brow twitched, a rebellion against the tension so tightly drawn across it. Perhaps she felt it, because her breathing paused altogether.

“It could be better, too,” he said. “Much better. He’d work for free if they let him. It’s not about money, Hermione.”

She puffed a tiny laugh, nervous against his chest. It did nothing to settle the disquiet creeping through his veins.

“That’s something only someone with far too much money could even consider,” she said.

“He can’t exactly help what he was born into.”

For the first time, touching her felt foreign, uneasy, like he wasn’t sure if he should lean into it or pull away. Hermione might be brilliant, but it became clear that this was something she did not understand. He considered his father’s annual case dispute and wondered if she would even bat an eye at the blatant disrespect given to his family by the

Ministry.

“Are we still talking about Theo,” she asked, a pause. “Or are we talking about you?”

He leaned down, pressing his cheek into the curls at the top of her head. He took a deep breath, lost in her vanilla shampoo.

“I didn’t go all the way to Sarajevo for my mastery because I really wanted to see the Balkans.”

“It was the only place you could find a mentor,” she said, knowing.

In the dark, her voice, flush against his chest, sounded like a siren, calling him to sea. It felt dangerous, suddenly, knowing that he’d follow, trust her not to drown him.

He jumped, almost toppling and taking her with him when a bright silvery-white stag bounded through the door. Draco had to close his eyes, then squint against the sudden intrusion of light into the darkness he’d grown accustomed to, uncomfortable and unnatural as it was.

Harry Potter’s voice spoke from the stag’s mouth.

“Working on getting you out now,” Potter said through the Patronus. “Shouldn’t be long.”

Draco felt Hermione loosen against him, a soft and almost inaudible, “good” breathed against his chest. It was a marvelous thing, a privilege, really, to witness Gryffindor bravery up close. It wasn’t as infallible as he’d assumed. He’d always thought of it as the absence of fear, of a strange disregard for personal safety or consequence. But it wasn’t that at all; Hermione had been afraid when she dealt with the blood curse, and she’d been anxious for the last thirty minutes, standing quietly against him in this room. The fear was present, but her bravery was in not letting it consume her.

“That’s a handy trick,” he said. “Being able to send messages with a Patronus.”

He could almost hear her smile.

“I could teach you, if you wanted to learn.”

He wondered if she could hear his frown.

“Hermione,” he started. Would she really make him say it? “I was a Death Eater. I can’t—”

“But you were never—”

“Don’t,” he said, tone solid and heavy and final. “That’s not true. It wasn’t *never*, Granger. I was a Death Eater. And right up until the moment I was branded, I believed in all of it. I hated, just like the rest of them.” He dropped his hands. He couldn’t touch her, not with the reminder.

She gave him too much credit, always had.

“You’ve changed,” she said. She hadn’t let go. If anything, her grip around his torso tightened, pressing herself closer against his chest.

That didn’t seem like enough.

“Draco, I don’t want to do this,” she said. “Whatever you’re thinking about—whatever parts of your past you think preclude you from living in the present—they don’t, okay? If it wasn’t *never*, fine. But it’s not now.”

Gods, what a witch.

“How do you know?”

He’d meant to ask it in his head, a question to himself. But it ricocheted in the blackness around them, fracturing into a deluge of other potential inquiries as the sound bounced off cursed objects and impassive stone walls.

“I can see it. And I’ll teach you how to cast a Patronus. Then you’ll know, too.”

“I don’t think it’s quite that simple.”

“It could be, if you let it.”

Light spilled in from the door, setting them free.

“You didn’t say anything about Malfoy being in there with you,” Potter said by way of greeting as Draco followed Hermione into the corridor. He squinted against the light, feeling slightly off-balance.

Theo leaned against the wall nearby, brow arched, smile spread across his face.

“Draco was helping,” Hermione said with a distinct edge of defensiveness coloring her tone. He heard her indignation simmering at the implication that she might not have been acting in a professional manner. “Thank you,” she added, giving Potter a hug.

“Might have had you out of there sooner if Potter let me try my hand at the wards,” Theo said from his place against the wall.

Draco watched Potter shake his head, releasing a heavily annoyed breath. With a smirk, Draco couldn’t help but wonder what had transpired in the corridor as Potter worked to release them whilst Theo observed. In the right mood, Theo could chip away at even the calmest composes with hardly any effort.

Draco knew because he’d seen Theo subtly needle his way beneath Lucius’s skin on more than one occasion.

“For the last time, Nott, you are a civilian whose only role here was to escort me through the Malfoy wards, *not* to assist in curse breaking.”

Theo made a grumbling noise of disappointment, waving a dismissive hand as he pushed off the wall.

“So, what were the two of you up to in there?” he asked, peering around them and into the dark room. “Looked a lot like cuddling. Cozy, was it?”

It was Potter’s turn to make a noise, something strangled and annoyed.

Hermione surprised Draco by responding before barely a beat had passed. “Theo, if you want to learn more about airplanes, you won’t follow that train of thought any further.”

Theo lifted a brow, a slow smirk spreading. He raised his hands in defense. “Low blow, Granger.”

He turned to Draco.

“Have you heard about these giant metal contraptions that muggles get inside of and then they *fly*?”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Theo.”

Hermione giggled.

Even Potter looked amused before he spoke.

“It’s amazing your house is so big that *I* can be in it, and your parents have no idea, do they? Or that you two are”—he made a gesture between Draco and Hermione—“doing whatever you’re doing.”

Theo clapped a hand on Draco’s shoulder, answering for him.

“Manor life. Lends itself to privacy and lingering childhood trauma.”

Draco tried not to roll his eyes.

“They have no idea. And you needn’t worry, I won’t tell them,” Draco said.

He only realized later how unclear he’d been. Potter or Granger: which one was the secret he’d committed to keeping?

Chapter End Notes

so many thanks to [icepower55](#), [Endless_musings](#), and [persephone_stone](#) for their tireless work supporting me and this story!

and many thanks to YOU, too! thank you for reading! thank you for commenting! thank you for kudos'ing (it's a word, just let me have this)! thank you for tumblr'ing (also a word, go with it)! thank you for discording! thank you for doing all the wondering things you're doing. i appreciate so much that anyone ever takes the time to read my words...y'all are truly the best <3

Chapter 15: -1.916, -2.000, -2.083

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

March

tick tock

“I’m not allowed to kiss you while you’re working, but you’re allowed to teach me how to cast a Patronus in the middle of the workday?” Draco asked through a clenched jaw, resisting the desire to throw his wand at the wall.

It took nearly all of February, but they’d managed to clear the entire first guest room of its dark magic, cursed objects, and general disarray, righting it into a reasonably pleasant looking space once more.

The second room didn’t provide nearly the same challenge. This led to a strange sort of multitasking wherein Hermione worked through her decommissioning while simultaneously instructing Draco on how to cast a Patronus in what had to be her swottiest, most frustrating tone. If he didn’t want to kiss her so badly most of the time, he might try jinxing her.

Casting a Patronus was an impossible task and he’d never be able to do it.

She adamantly refused to accept this fact. Every time he tried to tell her as much, her eyes grew wide and round and looked oh-so-disheartened that he’d stopped insisting and instead just played along.

He wouldn’t *mind* being able to cast a Patronus. He just knew that the Dark Mark on his arm represented more than a bad decision. It spoke to the content of his soul, the magic in his blood. It put him squarely in a subset of the population that didn’t have the right *stuff* inside them to cast magic so helplessly dependent on joy.

“I’m still working. And you’re not focusing. You barely even did the wand movements.”

Maybe he could get away with sending a tiny tripping jinx her way. And then he could catch her, and kiss her, and map every inch of her skin with his mouth.

“Hermione.”

She paused, several glowing yellow runes floating near her face. “I don’t want to hear it today, Draco. I know you can do this. You’re excellent with charms, and you have a unicorn hair wand for Merlin’s sake.”

She kept reminding him of that, as if his wand core alone told her everything she needed to know about the types of magic he could and could not do.

She returned to work on a cursed settee with barely a second glance. He rolled his eyes, fingers flexing around his wand. All his failed magic exhausted him, leaving him annoyed and frustrated.

Despite his persistent vexation, he enjoyed spending his days practicing magic with Hermione, casually chatting while she worked, and ever-so-rarely sneaking a kiss, even when he wanted to jinx her for correcting his technique every few minutes. Time passed in rolling waves, surging forward under the momentum of an interesting conversation or thought-spinning kiss. Dream-like. Unbelievable. Wonderful.

He focused on that: how her lips tasted, how her skin felt, how easy it was to know her now, to *be* with her. He’d turned into a right sop, the vast majority of his day spent orbiting this witch.

He concentrated, pulling a deep breath in through his nose. He let that feeling fill him up, lush and lovely. It felt like satin against his skin. Smelled like vanilla and amber. Tasted like apple caramel ice cream. Sounded like annoyed huffs and reluctant sighs. It looked like her.

“Expecto Patronum,” he said, voice level, confident, strong.

He kept his eyes closed; he needn’t open them to know that he’d once again failed. He couldn’t feel the magic. Or rather, he couldn’t feel it in his wand. He felt it filling him up; he knew that’s what it was. But no matter how hard he focused, how clear his incantation or how precise his wand movement, he couldn’t convert that magic in his bones into magic in his wand, ready to defend. It kept tumbling off craggy cliffs of bad decisions, grabbed by swaths of guilt, and swallowed by shame.

He let his wand arm drop and opened his eyes. Hermione watched him.

“Any light at all?” he asked.

She nodded. “A small burst.”

“Not enough.”

“It takes time, Draco. It took me months—”

“When you were a teenager. I’m an adult wizard with a mastery. And I’ve already been practicing for almost a month.”

“Would you rather go back to reading all day while I work?” she asked with a smile, teasing. She already knew the answer.

He might hate failing but he hated boredom more.

“I was researching for my potion. Now that it’s done I don’t need to do nearly as much reading.”

She laughed like his response had been funny, the sound floating through the space between them, brushing up against him. She poked at a yellow rune with her wand and sent it to a nearby desk for analysis.

“There’s always something to read,” she said. “How is *The Count of Monte Cristo* going?”

He tried to control his reaction, not tense out of guilt. His answer was a resounding: not well.

Thankfully, she seemed too engrossed in her work to catch his beat of hesitation.

“The print is very small,” he said.

He saw her wand pause, rune hovering, before she moved again.

“And how are you *enjoying* it?” she asked again, more careful in her wording.

“I’ve been getting headaches when I read it. The print is *very* small.”

“That’s not an opinion on the story.”

"I think I might need reading glasses."

"Best buy some, then. You have the galleons, don't you?" She arched a brow, still watching her runes and the desk, but her focus had shifted.

He didn't say anything.

After another beat, she cancelled her runes, waving her hand through the air where they'd been. He almost smiled at the action.

"You haven't finished it?"

"Hermione—"

"Do you not like it?" She didn't sound angry. She sounded sad. And that was so, so much worse.

"I really do think I need reading glasses," he started, and he watched her draw breath, ready to rebut. "But, no. I'm not especially enjoying it."

"That's—oh."

"Please don't do that, Hermione—that, with the frown—don't."

What exactly had Draco become? Dismantled by a frown on a pretty witch's face? Debilitated by the idea of having disappointed her?

"It's alright," she said. "I suppose I was just hoping you'd enjoy it."

"I'll finish it. I promise I will."

"You just need glasses first?" She offered a tiny smirk and conjured her runes again.

"Truly, I might."

He felt a bit like he'd just sidestepped a potentially terrible character assassination wherein his taste in literature almost cost him the affections of the woman in front of him.

"Let me take you out tonight."

"It's a Friday."

"A reasonable day of the week to go out and socialize with one's boyfriend."

She blinked, staring at him through one of her yellow runes. For a brief, terrifying moment, he thought he'd said something wrong, offended or upset her in some way. His pulse pounded beneath his skin, uncomfortable against his collar.

He watched as the thoughts scrolling across her face coalesced into a tiny grimace.

"But I like to catch up on my reading on Fridays. *Saturdays* are your day. I've given you a whole day." She'd started sounding a little pitched, a little panicked, at the end of her sentence.

"And I'm extremely grateful for that," he said, stepping forward, through her runes. He'd already committed, so he doubled down. "But I want to take you out *tonight*. I could take you to dinner, or dancing, or both. Or what if I let you take me to one of those muggle movies you've been talking about."

He started playing with her curls as he laid out his proposition, knowing it probably wasn't fair. She'd admitted more than once that she found him distracting. It wasn't as if he could just *ignore* that kind of information. Nor could he deny that he enjoyed watching her react to him: hitches of breath, tides of blush, wide eyes boring into his. "Could we strike a bargain?" he asked. "Let me take you out tonight and then we could read together all day tomorrow. I'll let you catch up on everything you want to read and I'll read *The Count of Monte Cristo*."

She lifted a hand, trailing a path with her palm up his chest, around his neck, nails dragging through his hair. She left fire in her wake, fresh burns where *sectumsempra* scars used to live.

He didn't even realize he'd closed his eyes until he heard her voice and noticed he couldn't see her face, couldn't watch her lips as she spoke.

"I'd like it known that I've been swayed by the promise of a full day of reading and *not* your attempt to seduce me."

He opened his eyes. She stood much closer than she had a moment before. Her hand at the base of his neck dragged through his hair, sending pleasant shivers shooting down his spine.

"You're doing an excellent job with a seduction of your own. Please continue."

He wouldn't have said anything if he knew she'd immediately pull her hand away, stepping back.

"I have to finish my work," she said, smile pulling at her mouth. "But I accept. We'll see a movie tonight."

He risked it, swooping in to kiss the curve of her neck, wrapping his arms around her. She laughed, swatting him; he stepped away before she could land another blow, laughing as he ran a hand through his hair.

"Excellent," he said with a grin. "I'll let you get to it then. I'll just be over here, trying to cast a Patronus, thinking about your hands. And your mouth. And that noise you make when I—"

"Draco."

—

The film turned his stomach, not totally dissimilar from a heavy and sustained dose of Occlumency. Like operating through a fog. Everything was too big and moved too quickly, and he had trouble keeping track of what he was meant to focus on when the perspective kept shifting and swooping, each time giving his insides an unpleasant lurch. It was bright and loud and overwhelming and an altogether unenjoyable experience. He could see how it might be awe-inspiring without all that—Theo would have gone mad for it—but Draco couldn't see past the nausea.

He gave up watching partway through. Instead, he angled himself so that he could watch Hermione enjoy it. This was something she did with Potter sometimes, that's what she'd told him. And now she'd shared it with Draco.

It felt oddly like a successful move on a chessboard, an infiltration behind enemy lines. Like he'd slipped past her defenses and integrated himself into her life. He wanted to learn about all the things she liked to do, big or small, and do them with her.

She seemed enthralled by the muggle entertainment: laughing when other people did, brows furrowing as the music swelled over what must have been a dramatic moment, chewing at the inside of her

cheek when things grew tense. He liked watching her reactions, memorizing them, and wondering which of them he might provoke in a different set of circumstances.

What he enjoyed most about his muggle movie-going experience—apart from the end—was her hands. Her arm lay casually on the divide between their seats, begging for him to touch. With a smirk, watching as she stared at the screen ahead of them, he let his index finger trace lines on the top of her hand. He found the tips of each finger and, with the lightest touch he could manage, drew a line from her nail, to her knuckles, over the top of her hand, and to her wrist.

She didn't look at him. Didn't acknowledge him in any way. But he saw her swallow, saw her breath stutter as she inhaled. He drew circles against her wrist and runes along her forearm. He experimented with how light he could make his touch while still making contact: tiny thrills of barely-touches. He slotted his fingers between hers, savoring the span of seconds where Hermione simply closed her eyes and all Draco could hear was his heart beating in his ears. Another dream-like experience in the sharp turn his life had taken with her inclusion.

As the film finally ended and they walked quietly, hand in hand, to the apparation point in an adjacent alleyway, Hermione startled him with a thwack against his shoulder.

"You didn't even watch the movie."

The lines across her forehead said she was annoyed by that fact. The smile breaking across her lips suggested otherwise.

"You were much more interesting," he said, pulling her against him with their interlocked fingers.

"You are *very* distracting," she said, attempting to disentangle herself from him. She smiled as she said it, only transforming her expression into a frown once he lifted a brow.

"You've mentioned that once or twice in the past."

They could have apparated, then; they were far enough from the muggles. But Draco found he rather liked the idea of prolonging his time with her in a dark, unknown place. He stepped into her space, hands encircling her waist as he walked her backwards, against the brick wall.

He swallowed her sharp intake of breath with a kiss, one hand roaming up her side, finding her neck, her hair. She melted against him almost immediately, chest pressed against his, her hips dangerously close, too. She made a whimpering noise that shot a hunger, a need, running wild up and down his spine, gathering heat below his belt.

He let his hands slip to her sides, her hips, and then beneath her arse where he gathered her flesh in his hands and hoisted her up, closer to his height, as he pressed her firmly against the brick wall. She wrapped her legs around his waist, rocking into him on the tail end of the most beautifully strangled sound he'd ever heard slip from her mouth.

He paused, breathing heavy, head spinning from lack of oxygen and utter awe. He'd endure the boredom of a thousand muggle films if he could have the promise of this kind of kiss at the end.

He kissed her jaw and she sighed, breath spilling and shaky.

He kissed her neck, and she squirmed against him.

He kissed the hollow just above her clavicle, and her heel dug into the back of his thigh.

He kissed lower, daring, narrowly above the neckline of her blouse, on the soft skin of her chest, so close to the curve of her breast.

She whimpered again, hands flexing in his hair. He rocked his hips into hers, scalp stinging, breath heavy, brain in a haze.

She made another noise, throat exposed, head tilted towards the sky.

"Draco," she said, words sounding scraped and forced through a raw throat. *He'd done that to her.*

He hummed against her pulse point, savoring the rapid flutter of it against her skin, his tongue.

"We should—I mean, we shouldn't—"

He drew his head up as she tilted hers down, eye to eye. Whatever she meant to say came out soundless: a breath against his mouth as he drew her lip between his teeth. He held her tighter, fingers digging into the underside of her thighs, exposed from her dress riding up.

“We shouldn’t—” she said again. “In the middle of an alley.” Her words wavered, entirely unresolved.

But he agreed. Just barely. “Not against a wall—not the first—”

“Right.”

She swallowed.

He struggled to breathe.

Neither of them moved.

“Come have a drink with me,” he said.

Almost a question, but not quite.

“Where?”

“My flat.”

“Only a drink?”

“No.”

She blinked several times, perhaps not expecting that answer, or the honesty propelling it from his lungs. But something about her, especially in such close proximity to her lips and her skin, robbed him of any impulses towards dishonesty.

She nodded, slowly at first, then with more certainty. Her grip on his hair tightened again, his only warning before she kissed him again.

Hermione Granger. *The* Hermione Granger let him pin her against a brick wall somewhere in the middle of muggle London and snog her senseless, rocking against her like a lust-crazed teenager, and drinking in every delicious sound that spilled from her mouth.

If he didn’t stop he was going to fuck her there, too.

They’d agreed on a drink. And his flat. And more.

He loosened his grip on her legs, letting out a tortured groan as she slid to the ground, dragging against his erection, a fresh bolt of bliss careening down his spine.

He cleared his throat as she smoothed her dress back down. The next

moment, with a turn and a *pop*, they were gone.

For as much as Draco enjoyed seeing Hermione in his flat, he'd only managed to have her over a handful of times, opportunities constantly constrained by her packed schedule and extensive list of commitments. He'd never known anyone who went to as many book signings, brunches, and museum exhibit openings as Hermione Granger.

The first time she visited after the Potters' wedding in January, a week after their explosive kiss in the gardens, she hand-delivered a thank you card for the wedding gift she'd apparently given him co-credit for giving. He kissed her against the kitchen cabinets, abandoning his attempts at preparing her a cup of tea and acting as a proper host. She introduced him to the rigorous schedule that ruled her life shortly after he discovered a spot behind her ear that made her arch into him with every touch of his tongue.

The second time, only days after they'd been trapped together in the guest hall, she visited on a Saturday afternoon, riled up over an argument with Ronald Weasley. Draco had been planning on snogging her for several hours. Instead, they bickered over something they agreed on; Ronald Weasley sometimes said idiotic things, including several snide comments about Draco. Evidently, Potter had let slip how he'd found them in the trapped guest room together and that had set off a rant. Even though Draco agreed with Hermione's outrage on his behalf—was touched, honestly—it didn't help her mood. Apparently everything Draco said, in agreement with her or not, simply irritated her into an argument out of principle. Weasley apologized to Hermione the next day, and Draco learned something very important about her.

Hermione valued the power of a sincere apology.

Which was around the same time he realized that he, in all his idiocy, had not actually, ever, apologized to her for, well—anything. Everything.

He had nightmares that night for the first time in months, since moving to his own flat, probably. He dreamed of her screaming; he

dreamed of her crying. He dreamed of himself, hating her.

The third time she visited, towards the end of February, he intended to apologize. Properly and completely. He intended to beg for her forgiveness and would accept whatever scraps of a relationship she'd allow him. He planned to cook her a meal, loosen his tongue and her heart with a lovely vintage of red wine. But he'd burned the food, cursing over cooking spells. She dissolved into laughter, giggling over his failed attempts at domesticity. And it was so easy to laugh with her, to sip their wine and order take away and sneak kisses in-between debates over the ideal hybridization of muggle and magical kitchen and cooking processes.

The fourth time, this time, an apology for reprehensible ideologies, horrific decision making, and several years' worth of guilt, didn't seem in the cards. Not when *she* pushed *him* against his own fireplace the moment they apparated into the living room, pretense of drinks utterly abandoned.

He could have stopped her. He could have insisted that he get his guilt off his chest, that he verbalize the things he knew she'd already forgiven him for.

But he had trouble finding the motivation for such maudlin things when her devious, delectable, daring little hands slipped to his rapidly hardening cock, palming him through his trousers.

"Fucking—*Merlin*, Hermione."

"Sorry," she said, lips against his neck. He buried his hands deep in her hair. Either his eyes were closed or he'd been blinded by pleasure; both seemed equally likely. "Did you actually want drinks?"

He laughed, back of his head thudding against the mantel.

"Not at all," he said. Her fingers found his belt buckle.

He leaned forward, stealing a kiss, slowing her. "Did you want to—sit, or—we're practically inside the fireplace."

She stepped back, and he immediately regretted his words. He was an idiot. An actual, certifiable idiot who'd just blown his chances at having her touch him. Which was unfortunate, because he *ached* for her: desire burning up his blood, drying him out.

She raised a brow at him, a slow smirk spreading across her kiss

reddened lips.

“Is this too much spontaneity for one day?” she asked, taking another step away, towards the velvet sofa. She sat, watching him, pinning him to the fireplace with her stare. “We’ve already deviated from my schedule once today. I certainly didn’t have any of this”—a pointed look at his trousers where his interest was still very, very apparent —“on the schedule this week.”

She sat, crossing her legs and lobbing a serene smile across his living room. He blinked. She was going to kill him. Undoing, indeed.

“*Granger.*” He lost himself for a moment to the idea of her sitting and considering the best day of the week, the best time of day in between all her other responsibilities, to engage in some kind of, any kind of, physical intimacy beyond the delightfully frustrating kissing they’d been doing. “I can’t decide if I want that to be a joke or not.”

She didn’t comment. Instead: “So. Are you in favor of or in opposition to the spontaneity?”

Only Hermione Granger could make what effectively boiled down to a sexual proposition sound like a bloody board meeting.

“In favor,” he said. “Strongly in favor.”

He finally moved, pushing off the fireplace and crossing the room. He dipped, leaning over her and stealing a kiss. She ran a hand along his jaw, so soft, so warm. Her fingers trailed down his throat and caught in the buttons running down the front of his shirt.

“So,” she started, voice coming out shaky against his mouth. “I can touch you?”

He leaned further down, pushing her against the back of the sofa as he dropped to his knees in front of it.

“*Gods* yes,” he nearly growled, voice roughened by the image that flared to life inside his head. He kissed the spot at the base of her throat that made her keen prettily against him, skating his hands along her sides. “But I want to touch you first.”

The wobbling whimper that escaped her throat didn’t sound entirely like the enthusiasm he sought. He broke them apart, leaning back against his heels, literally on his knees for her. His hands now rested on the tops of her thighs, one small movement from dipping beneath

the hem of her dress.

He met her eyes, fingers dancing against her skin.

“May I?” he asked.

She nodded. Then, in a croaking voice that betrayed her nerves, “Yes.”

That sound, that strangle in her throat, made something in his chest tighten: a clench behind ribs, a drop in a still pool sending waves rippling outward. He leaned forward to kiss her again, bracketed between her legs. She let out a startled breath when he looped his arms around her middle, pulling her against him, perched closer to the edge of the sofa.

His hands dipped, playing with the hem of her dress, before beginning a path beneath the fabric, up her legs, to her knickers that he quickly removed. He would make this perfect for her. He had some—enough?—experience with women to do that much. He would make her forget her nerves, wonder why she’d ever had them. He’d make her come panting his name, forgetting all the things he’d not yet sought forgiveness for, forgetting all his flaws that made this endeavor of theirs impossible, forgetting that she could have anyone and, for some reason, had picked him.

With his head between her thighs, her nails scratching against his scalp as she gripped his hair, he lost himself in the flush of red creeping up her chest. He twisted his hands in the soft fabric of her dress, bunched above her hips, anchoring him.

She flushed, panted breath growing heavier at every careful swirl and swipe of his tongue, savoring the noises he could pull from her throat: a symphony of sounds in pleasure. He loved them. Loved—this.

He groaned at a particularly rough drag of her nails, which only encouraged her more, a quiver beneath him. She arched, head thrown back: so close, so close. He disentangled a hand from the fabric of her dress, touching her, teasing her, tasting her. Under the debilitating force of his focus, determined to drive her to the edge and over it, he nearly forgot to breathe, to think. The entirety of his world had narrowed down to the feeling of her canting her hips against his mouth, stuttering breath punctuated by shattered attempts at speaking his name.

She flexed her hand in his hair again, “Like that—Draco, *gods*.”

He watched her face tense, eyes screwed shut, mouth agape as she arched against him. He was certain, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that he'd disassembled every last one of her nerves, lit them on fire, and repurposed them for her pleasure. He held her tight, slowing his touches, dropping kisses against the inside of her thighs as she shuddered, panting.

When she opened her eyes again—looking down at him as her hands went limp, falling from his hair—her eyes had a distinctly glassy, distant look to them. He let himself smirk, fully satisfied that he'd been able to please her.

She lifted a hand, pressed a finger against his bottom lip as she looked at him with curiosity, like perhaps she'd never really seen him before.

"Your hair," she said, voice dry and stunted. It must have looked a mess, and she was the only one he'd allow to do that.

"Your fault."

He let her pull him up, off his knees that had started to ache against the hardwood: entirely worth it.

When he kissed her again, her mouth felt different, languid and lazy in the afterglow of an orgasm. Another shape he could add to his catalogue. He kissed her, let her kiss him, let her maneuver him.

Around the time she wrapped her beautiful lips around his cock, a prettier sight than any fantasy he'd ever had, he identified a foreign feeling behind his ribs, swelling with every bob of her brilliant head, threatening to overflow.

He wound her curls around his fist, resisting the instinct to thrust into her, hips begging for movement, for agency in this endeavor. Instead, he let his head fall back, lost to soft, warm sensations that he might transmute to round, full sounds inside his mouth, his throat, his heart.

His mind ran blank, lost to the feeling of her mouth on his cock, driving away coherent thought. This—surely this—could be Patronus worthy.

Chapter End Notes

hi friends, broken record amanda, here. i adore you all, i appreciate so much every comment, kudos, ask, and discord

message. y'all are seriously the greatest and your enthusiasm is literally powering me through the heavy writing im doing this week. i cannot thank you enough. you are the most amazing people, thank you so, so much for reading this story!! <3

so much love to [icepower55](#), [Endless_musings](#), and [persephone_stone](#) who barely even blinked when i dropped 60k words of new draft on them this week. rockstars, these ladies.

Chapter 16: -1.833, -1.916, -2.000

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

April

tick tock

The third room they tackled in the guest hall ended up being quite the cunt, in Draco's professional opinion. It took almost a full day just to get the door open, and Hermione didn't take kindly to Draco's occasional—hourly—suggestion that perhaps if they called Theo, he could get them through.

He wasn't sure if professional boundaries or personal pride kept her insisting that Theo's skill set wouldn't be required. Draco considered it a success that he even got her to admit that: yes, Theo could probably handle the wards *if* they needed to call him. Which they didn't, according to her.

Draco spent most of his time failing to produce a Patronus while he waited for her to break the wards on the door. He'd been painfully—embarrassingly—optimistic that memories of her mouth on him, scorching rational thought from his brain, would be more than enough to conjure a corporeal Patronus.

He managed one pitiful wisp of white light, lasting as long as it took for his frustration to consume him again, shutting down his happy thoughts. When Hermione asked if he was trying a new memory, embarrassment kept him from admitting he had been, and that it involved the cacophony of beautiful noises she made when she came.

For two weeks, he'd sustained himself on the memory of their post-movie evening together: an appetizer against the sofa, a main course in his bed. They'd spent hours tangled up together before she reluctantly pulled herself away, a beautifully sated smile on her face as she kissed him farewell and returned to hers. Between then and now, he stole precious moments with her when he could, but they'd spent most of their time in a frustratingly professional capacity.

He had no intentions of sabotaging his chances at continued intimacy

by admitting to how frequently he thought about her mouth—even for the purposes of casting a Patronus—while she did her work.

“You sound frustrated,” she said, back turned to him.

Obviously. Yet another Patronus attempt had fizzled and died in an underwhelming show of dim white light.

“You do, too,” he snapped: nastier than he should have been.

He heard the telling click of a door handle turning, brushing against the strike plate.

“Not anymore,” she said. Triumph overtook her posture: from slightly hunched and tensed to standing tall and loose. But the door only represented the first step of many.

When he moved to join her, ready to enter the room at her side, she arched a brow at him.

“Don’t you dare say a thing about how Theo could have done that faster.”

He smirked.

“Wouldn’t dream of it. I only intended to compliment you on your brilliance. Excellent work.” He ducked and kissed her cheek despite her eye roll and disbelieving chuckle.

They paused at the threshold.

“It’s empty,” Draco said, staring into a room devoid of any furnishings. Unease prickled at his skin, sliding beneath it.

Hermione didn’t seem to find the emptiness that greeted them all that alarming.

“Considering how many rooms there are here, I’m honestly amazed this is the first that’s empty. How many bedroom sets and sitting rooms can one household have?”

She cast her runes and frowned: red light engulfed them. Draco cast his own to confirm.

“I presume this means we aren’t looking for dark magic stuck to a sofa?”

She let out a breath. “No. Probably more wards, security type stuff. It’s not entirely unexpected considering all the trouble the door put me through.”

Draco’s family owned an abundance of furniture. He’d taken a whole flat’s worth out of storage to furnish his new place. He had trouble seeing his mother allowing for a single unfurnished room to exist. It unsettled him, incongruous with his understanding of the manor and his mother.

“Do you feel the intuitive magic?” came Hermione’s voice beside him, pulling him from his staring contest with a sunbeam bisecting the room, illuminating the dust motes that acted as the only inhabitants of the space. She continued, “My runes are pointing me towards the center of the room, drawing me to the source of the threat. Do you feel it too?”

He felt—something. A nebulous tug in that direction, a red rune that attracted his focus more than the others. But he couldn’t separate that feeling from his unease about the lack of furnishings.

Not even a bookcase.

Or a desk.

Or a piano: didn’t they have six or seven of those laying around?

“I—can’t tell,” he said, attention torn between the glowing runes in front of him and the empty space beyond that. “Something about this room—”

“It’s eerie, yes.”

“Glad I’m not the only one,” he began, just as she lifted her foot to take a step. “Hermione, wait.”

She glanced back at him. “I know,” she said. “But the best I can do is follow the runes.”

“There should be furniture.”

“That’s what has you worried?”

“Every room in this manor is furnished.”

She lifted a brow, suspicion and amusement twitching at the edges of her mouth.

“I mean this in a very affectionate way, I promise. But I sincerely doubt you’ve been in every room in this manor.”

He scowled at her. Of course he hadn’t been in *every* room. There were several in his parents’ wing he’d never had reason to enter. Besides, those were theirs, private. But that wasn’t the point.

“I know my mother, Hermione. I know how she maintains her home.”

“Listen to your runes, then,” she said. “Are they providing you with any other warnings or suggestions?”

He clenched his jaw, teeth grinding together.

“I just think we should be cautious,” he said, feeling like a repetitive idiot. He’d said that to her before, in the first room. They’d sprung a trap because he delayed her work. But then again, he’d given a similar warning the first time she wanted to work in this hall, too; she’d ended up in St. Mungo’s on that occasion.

She smiled at him and reached for his hand.

“I really appreciate that you’re concerned for me. Risk is part of my job. At a certain point, the best I can do is use the tools the Ministry has provided.”

“That’s not reassuring. The Ministry is staffed by imbeciles.”

She opted to ignore his insult against her employer. Instead, she squeezed his hand and then let it go, finally taking a step towards the center of the room.

It happened in an instant. She stumbled back—into him—tiny cuts littering her hands and face: anywhere her skin had been exposed. As if glass had exploded right in front of her, slicing and shredding her skin. She hissed, wand already poised to heal her wounds. Draco dragged her out of the room by her shoulders.

“It’s nothing,” she said in a rush when she caught his eye.

He must have looked murderous, manic. He could feel the blood draining from his face, the hard line forming at his brow. Fury at an empty room, at her for putting herself in danger.

“I *told* you something was off, I—” He forced himself to stop, torn between concern and anger: concern for her wellbeing, anger that

she'd put herself at risk.

"This is nothing," she repeated. "A small repellent curse, illusionary in nature, they can misdirect the runes sometimes, but they aren't especially dangerous." She'd already healed one hand completely, switching her wand into her left hand to tackle the other.

He stopped her.

"Let me. Don't use your off-hand for healing magic. Don't you know that?" He knew his words came out sharp and snappish, but he quite literally had her blood on his hands. His fingers smeared it at her wrists, holding her steady as he cast several healing charms to mend the tiny cuts. His mouth ran dry, robbing him of the ability to swallow against a tightness at the back of his throat. "This is not *nothing* Hermione, you're *bleeding*."

"It's a small curse," she said again, stilling as he healed her hand, then her face, flesh stitching itself back together: pink and raw, then white, then fading back to her normal skin tone. "It wouldn't have even done anything to you; they're usually blood specific."

If he hadn't wanted to vomit before, he certainly did now.

"It's okay," she continued. "It could have been significantly worse. Really, this curse is only a minor inconvenience."

He couldn't tear his eyes away from the droplets of blood, five of them, that had dripped onto the stone floor. He could see his right hand hanging limp in his periphery, more red—her blood—spilled in this place.

"I'm sorry," he said. For so much.

"It's alright. Draco, it's not your fault. I probably should have been more cautious, as you suggested."

"Not for the curse. I mean—yes, for the curse. For being angry at you for triggering it. But also for—all of it."

He slumped against the wall, sliding to the floor. Evidently, a couple good orgasms could quell his conscience for two weeks and no longer. The reality that he'd never truly apologized to her made itself known: a shift in temperature, in tone, in his entire ability to process the scene around him.

He wiped his hand against his trousers, blood blending into black wool. If he didn't know to look for it, he'd have no idea her blood had been absorbed into his pant leg, invisible against the dark fabric. He could carry it with him, and no one would ever know.

Guilt returned in force, a roar behind his eardrums.

Hermione crouched in front of him, stealing into his field of view. She shifted to her knees, reaching for him with a tentative hand, but he leaned away from it.

"Please don't, Hermione. I really don't deserve—any kindness from you."

"Draco, what are you—"

Despite the snitch-sized ball in the back of his throat, threatening to choke him of his words and his oxygen, he spilled.

"I never apologized to you. For everything." He glanced wildly around them, at the impersonal stone walls that constituted his family legacy. He shrugged his shoulders, head falling back against the stone behind him. Anything he might say felt like far too little, far too late. "I just—I'm sorry. For hating you. For hurting you. For—all of it. I should have said so, ages ago. A year, at least. But I didn't. And I—I need you to know that I am sorry, I truly am. I don't want there to be any question. Any doubt." The words nearly strangled him, so lifeless and painful inside his throat, scraping and sticking at his flesh.

He kept his eyes closed, head resting against the wall. His heart felt like it might beat out of his chest and run away with the memory of what had felt a lot like happiness with Hermione. Something he wouldn't have again. Not after she realized how long she'd let him get away with being an unrepentant villain in her story.

She'd let him *touch* her. Intimately. He should never have—his throat felt like it might seal shut.

She didn't say anything. Quiet dragged out the space between them. Behind closed eyes, it felt like the silence had pulled her away, either literally or figuratively; he had no idea.

Finally, from much closer than he expected, she spoke: "An apology isn't always enough."

He felt like the granite floor beneath him had cracked open, a pit to

welcome him into a new cold reality without her. How many minutes had passed since he'd managed to conjure a tiny bit of light based on her beautiful mouth, on how it felt to touch her, be touched by her? No more, never again. His chest ached, something seeped from between his ribs.

Then her hand touched his knee.

He jerked his head up, eyes flying open. He didn't know her to be cruel. If she meant to do this, she needn't torture him with her touch.

"If you'd apologized then, a year ago—I don't know that it would have been enough."

She pulled her lip between her teeth as his heart stammered painfully, a thud in the center of his chest. The potential of her words, the hidden hope in them, hit him straight in the solar plexus, nearly knocking the wind out of him. His diaphragm seized, holding his breath hostage.

"You've shown me. You need to know that. I forgave you a very long time ago, Draco."

She scooted closer, knees between his legs. When she touched his chin, he still didn't believe her. He had to replay her words inside his head several times, a loop of understanding he did not deserve.

"I know you did," he said, realizing he had to say something, even if none of it felt right. "But that doesn't mean I deserve it. You're too kind, Hermione. Too forgiving."

She sighed, a sound hovering between the lines of sadness and annoyance.

"Why are you thinking about this?" she asked. "I thought we've been—enjoying ourselves? I've been happy, I've been—"

She broke off from whatever she planned to say. Instead, she leaned forward and kissed him.

She never kissed him during the workday.

She only occasionally allowed him to sneak one for himself.

And never beyond the closed parlor doors.

But she kissed him all the same, in the middle of the guest hall

corridor. She kissed him so thoroughly, with such intent, that he nearly forgot his own name, his own past, and all the reasons why those things should be a barrier to this very act.

When she pulled away, this beautiful impossibility of a woman, she pulled him out of his own head by doing what she did so very often: asking a question about scheduling.

“You’re still coming with me to the bookstore tomorrow, right?”

He gave her an appreciative squeeze with his hand, which had found its way to the back of her neck as she kissed him, running his fingers along either side of her spine.

He found the guilt. He found the shame. He packed it up and flaked it away, hoping he might lose it amongst the rubble, allowed to forget.



One surprising side effect of dating Hermione Granger was the amount of time he found himself in the muggle world. He hadn’t been opposed to it in theory; he’d dabbled while living abroad, but he now found himself experiencing it nearly every week. The muggle world didn’t know who they were, wouldn’t judge them for spending time together, for their hand holding or fleeting kisses. There would be no photographs, no newspaper articles that found their way back to Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy.

They could simply exist with each other, even if it meant without magic.

Not to mention the galleon to pound exchange rate worked incredibly well in his favor.

Truth be told, Draco didn’t mind it so much. There was a disorienting quality to it sometimes, and he didn’t enjoy feeling unprepared or ignorant. But for the most part, dating in the muggle world wasn’t unlike dating in the wizarding world—with what limited experience he had before Hermione.

She dragged him to a cramped corner bookstore on a Saturday in April, insisting that he would love it, but looking wary as she

introduced him to the place all the same.

“Do the Flourish and Blotts proprietors know you have a secret muggle bookstore on the side?” he asked, leaning against a shelf and watching as she browsed the nonfiction section.

He wondered if he’d ever tire of the look on her face: lips parted slightly, occasionally moving as she mouthed the titles to herself, brows furrowing and smoothing in her critical assessment of the things she saw, acknowledgement written in her features.

He’d never known a soul with as expressive a face as Hermione. Every thought. Every idea. She wore them without realizing it. Watching it had become his new favorite exercise in nonverbal communication, trying to figure out what each twitch at her brow and wrinkle of her nose might mean.

“If Flourish and Blotts is interested in an exclusive relationship with me then it ought to specify that, and perhaps consider appealing to all my interests. They stock exclusively magical books; there’s so many more I’d like to read.”

She ducked past him, flashing him a smile as she turned the corner into a new section. He followed, enjoying every moment in this quiet, mostly-empty muggle bookshop, flirting with his girlfriend.

“Besides,” she said, pulling a book from the shelf and scanning the back cover, somehow capable of speaking and reading at the same time. “I like this little bookstore. Flourish and Blotts is always so busy.”

“I’m not convinced the owner is even conscious over there,” Draco said, taking the book from her, meeting only the slightest bit of resistance. She certainly didn’t like sharing her books, even when they weren’t hers yet, but he wanted to satisfy his curiosity about what had caught her attention.

“He’s awake,” she said. “He just has a drowsy look to him.”

The clerk looked one long blink from an upright nap. Draco rolled his eyes. He flipped the book over in his hands.

“A biography? Who is Amelia Earhart?”

“A muggle,” she said and Draco couldn’t quite tell if she meant to be facetious, but she continued. “She flew airplanes—remember Theo

telling you about them a couple of months ago?”

“I thought you two were joking—”

“She disappeared while trying to circumnavigate the world. I’ve been —” She stopped, biting at her lip, expression closing off.

He moved closer to her, ducking out of the barely conscious shopkeeper’s sight. He’d be lying if he pretended a series of salacious thoughts about getting Hermione off in a bookstore didn’t cross his mind. Surely she’d thought something similar at some point in her life. She liked books and libraries and bookstores more than anyone he knew.

“You’ve been...” he prompted. She looked up at him, a nervous flicker behind her eye, a faint blush coloring her cheeks. Maybe she’d been thinking about salacious things, too.

He stepped even closer, one hand finding her waist, savoring her tiny intake of breath as he pivoted them, positioning her against the shelves. She reached for the book in his other hand, taking it back.

“I’ve been working my way through the biographies here. In alphabetical order.” She looked past him—beyond him—as she spoke, clutching the book to her chest. “This one is next.”

He almost laughed, but her look of embarrassment stopped him. Her words had come out slow, halting, like it had been truly difficult for her to will them into existence. He didn’t say anything. Instead, his eyes flicked to the shelves above her head, taking note of the titles he saw, scanning the gap where Amelia Earhart had once been.

“That’s—” he started.

“Don’t make fun of me.” Declaration caught between indignation and insecurity. So, she hadn’t been thinking about doing any unsavory things in a bookshop with him. Unexpectedly, her surprise confession only made him want her more.

“I wasn’t planning on it.”

She rolled her eyes, making a halfhearted attempt to push past him; Draco didn’t move. He ducked his head, breathing in her ear the way he knew she liked. He felt her shiver before he spoke his first word.

“How long have you been working on this, Granger?”

Another shiver, stronger. One of her hands found his chest, a finger trailing down the front of his shirt as she sighed.

“A little over a year, maybe? I discovered this place shortly after I broke up with Ron. It—seemed like a good hobby to occupy all my free time.” She’d loosened, no longer unnecessarily embarrassed for a hobby she enjoyed. As if anything about Hermione and her love of books could be embarrassing. He’d decided long ago that it was one of her more endearing qualities.

She tilted her head slightly and lifted her finger from his chest, tapping a title near the side of her face.

“I’ve been looking forward to this one for a few months now. Only three more after Earhart.”

Draco read the spine, “And who is TS Eliot?”

She made a little gasping noise, as if scandalized that he did not know.

“He’s a writer, a poet. He writes—beautiful things.”

“And because you’re working your way through these biographies alphabetically, you’ve denied yourself of reading the one you want?”

“I’ve enjoyed the others, too,” she said with a small shake of her head. “There are so many interesting muggles that we know nothing about in the wizarding world. But—yes, I’m looking forward to Eliot, especially.”

“How long? Three books plus the flying lady; how long will that take you?”

She shivered again, eyes darting down to where his fingers had slipped beneath her jumper, drawing circles with his thumb against her skin.

She locked eyes with him, a pause as she considered.

“Maybe two weeks—I have a few other things to read as well, so I won’t be able to devote my time exclusively to—”

He chuckled, halting her words.

“Have you not looked at the one on this”—he tilted his head to read the title—“Einstein person? It must be close to a thousand pages long.

Hermione, you are a very impressive witch, but not even you can read that much, that fast.”

She narrowed her eyes at him, “And here I was thinking you wanted to kiss me.”

He leaned closer.

“I do, very much.”

“Your odds of doing so drop dramatically when you antagonize me.”

Closer still.

“Are you certain that’s the case? Sometimes I think you enjoy it when I rile you up.”

She licked her lips, a tiny flick of her tongue as she drew breath.

“How do you do that?” she asked. Her voice had dropped, barely a whisper between them.

“Do what?”

His nose brushed hers.

“Look all—handsome, and like you’d do anything to touch me.”

“Probably because I would.”

She whimpered, head tilting back. He let his lips touch hers, just enough, just for him, before pulling back.

“I suppose I can’t kiss you, then.”

“What?” she asked, voice propelled much louder than necessary, failing to properly adjust out of the whispered words they’d been sharing.

“Well you see, I’d like to antagonize you some more. And if that means no—”

She pulled him to her, stealing a kiss as he smiled against her lips. He wasted little time, arms encircling her, only tangentially aware that they were barely out of sight. He pushed her back against the shelves, gently, so as not to jostle them. He let his thigh rest between her legs, pressed against her as she released an almost imperceptible noise of

pleasure, searing it into his skin.

“There’s no way”—he broke from her mouth, dipping to her neck, dragging his teeth along the vertical tendons in her throat—“that you’re getting to Eliot in the next two weeks.”

A puff of frustrated air coasted by his ear.

“You are impossible. And childish.” Her voice caught when he dipped his tongue into the hollow at the base of her throat.

She said one thing, but her body arched against him regardless, a beautiful curve of her spine, pressing her chest against his as she rocked—just enough—against his leg; he knew she must be fighting off her own pleasure.

“Doesn’t feel very childish to me,” he said, hand dipping beneath the hem of her jumper, skating up her ribs.

She pulled away. First, pressing herself against the shelves but, in finding nowhere to go, leaning to the side, disentangling herself from his lips and limbs. She cleared her throat.

“We are in public.” He supposed she intended to sound scandalized.

She only sounded breathless.

He stepped back, giving her space, brow arched as he crossed his arms, savoring her fluster.

“Care to wager on it?” he asked.

“Wager on what?”

“Eliot.”

She laughed.

“What, that I can’t get to it in two weeks?”

“Precisely.”

She picked up the biography on Earhart she’d apparently dropped, brushing the cover as if to sweep away a layer of nonexistent dirt.

“If you win?” she asked. Her tone went flat, like she could barely bring herself to entertain such a notion.

He considered.

“You lift the moratorium on workday kisses.”

“No, Draco. That’s unprofessional.”

It was worth a shot.

“Fine, I get to complain as much as I want about my Patronus progress, and you can’t stop me.” She made an unamused sound. “And if you win?” he continued. “What do you want? Anything at all.”

She didn’t answer at first, thoughts crawling across her face. Anticipation crept up Draco’s spine when she glanced up at him, an amused glint flashing from her eyes. She smirked.

“The sofa.”

“Excuse me?”

“The hideous one. That tufted velvet green nightmare of a sofa. I have a rather sentimental attachment to it despite how atrocious it is.”

He couldn’t help himself; he took a tiny, half-step towards her.

“Because of all the ways I’ve touched you on it?”

She pressed her lips together, averting her eyes as her chest flushed pink. She cleared her throat and ignored him.

“To summarize, if I get to Eliot in the next two weeks, the sofa is mine. If I don’t, you get to complain and be a prat while I’m working?”

He chuckled, offering his hand.

“Since you clearly have no idea what you’re getting into, betting with a Slytherin, I’m willing to extend the timeline indefinitely. Whenever you get to Eliot, the sofa is yours.”

She narrowed her eyes at him, “Sounds like you don’t even want to win, in that case.”

He pointed at himself. “Slytherin. And you’ve already admitted that you find me very distracting.” A pause, a smile. “What do you say?”

She made a show of rolling her eyes and shaking her head, curls

bouncing around her as she did. But she took his hand all the same. He pulled her in for another kiss.

“Felt like something we should seal with a kiss, don’t you think?” he asked.

She gave him that *you’re impossible* smile again and led him to the register.

He looked forward to being able to complain about his nonexistent Patronus as much as he pleased.

The next day, he returned to the shop, having put the exceptional galleon exchange rate to good use, and paid heftily for the owner to stock as many biographies as he could find between Earhart and Eliot.

Chapter End Notes

thank you everyone so much for reading and commenting! it's the best motivation in the world to know that there are folks out there enjoying this story! i certainly hope you enjoyed this chapter! thank you so much for reading!! <3

many and eternal thanks to my betas [icepower55](#), [Endless_musings](#), and [persephone_stone](#). they're the best, but y'all already know this!

Chapter 17: -1.750, -1.833, -1.916

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

May

tick tock

In yet another series of events Draco could never have imagined prior to entangling himself in a relationship with Hermione Granger, he found himself sitting in Harry Potter's home on the anniversary of the Battle of Hogwarts.

Strangely, Draco had actually visited Grimmauld Place once before, when he was very young, accompanying his mother to the property upon the passing of her Aunt Walburga. Narcissa had called the home *unsalvageable* and set her sights on newer properties in the city, should they wish to invest in London real estate. Draco remembered her surprise when his Aunt Bellatrix never claimed the decrepit old home either, leaving it abandoned until Harry Potter and his ever righteous band of Gryffindors took up residence.

Sitting in the home now, Draco found the clash between classic pureblood aristocratic interior design and what he could only assume was the Weaslette's attempt at making the space less, well, nightmare-inducing with a collection of excessively fluffy throw pillows, distinctly disorienting and unsettling.

Nervousness chewed at his skin: a constant, prickling reminder that he did not belong with these people, especially not on this day. Hermione had insisted it would be a small gathering, that they simply liked to spend time together on a difficult day, eating food, having some drinks. She seemed incapable of understanding that his presence ought to be offensive and grotesque, that he would be unwelcome. His protests clattered uselessly against the optimism she wore like armor.

He might have felt proud that he'd so thoroughly charmed her into ignoring his horror show of a history, if not for the fact that those charms had landed him in Harry Potter's living room, loitering in a far corner and trying to make himself as inconspicuous as possible.

A pink-haired blur threw itself over the arm of his chair, tiny hands grabbing for purchase as Draco heard a breathless *oomph* from impact. Teddy Lupin looked up at him, pink hair melting into an uncanny white-blond.

“Why are you in the corner?” Teddy asked.

“I’m hiding.”

Teddy wrinkled his nose, eyeing the doorway as if expecting Andromeda to appear at any moment to ruin his fun.

“Is it because of the vegetables? I can’t have any more sweets until I eat my vegetables. Grandmother says so.”

Draco let out a gasp of mock shock. “There are vegetables, too? All the more reason for us to hide, don’t you think?”

“I want to play outside.”

“You and me both, kid. A game of Quidditch would do wonders for my stress right about now.”

Teddy bounced against the armrest, eyes wide with excitement.

“You play Quidditch? Uncle Harry plays Quidditch. He’s the best—”

“Let’s not be hasty. Potter is hardly *the best*. He’s adequate and infuriatingly lucky.”

“You—talk funny.”

Draco sighed, wincing.

“Sorry—I don’t talk to a lot of kids. I just mean, he’s not the *best*. I played against him in school.”

“Did you beat him?”

“Well—I, there was one time—”

“Was there?” Potter asked from the doorway, brows lifted over his stupid spectacles.

“Yes. There was.”

“Was that the time—well, one of the times—I was unconscious?”

Draco faltered. Honestly, he wasn't sure.

Potter clearly didn't expect an answer; he stepped into the room and dropped onto a nearby sofa.

"What are you two doing in here? There's food downstairs in the kitchens if you're hungry."

"We're hiding," Teddy said before launching himself into Potter's midsection.

Potter made a strangled sound upon impact, but laughed as he lifted the boy and planted him back on the floor.

"Got room for one more?" Potter asked. Teddy nodded enthusiastically. "I get why Malfoy's hiding, but why are you here, Teddy?"

"Did you know Draco is my cousin?" Teddy asked, completely ignoring Potter's question. "He's really cool."

"First cousin once removed," Draco said beneath his breath. He picked at a loose thread on the arm of his chair, rubbing it between two fingers and expecting the worst. He couldn't foresee any good coming from Potter's decision to voluntarily spend time alone—well, mostly alone—in the same room as Draco.

And on the anniversary of the Battle of Hogwarts, no less.

Potter didn't spare Draco a second glance. Instead, he laid sideways on the sofa, still engaging Teddy.

"He's cool, huh? What makes him so cool, then?"

"His hair."

"I thought you liked *my* hair," Potter said.

"His is cooler."

That probably shouldn't have pleased Draco as much as it did.

Potter seemed to ponder that before he poked Teddy in the stomach, sending the child scampering out of reach with a shrill laugh.

"What else is so cool about Malfoy?"

“He doesn’t like vegetables, either.”

Draco heard Potter suppress a snort of laughter. He narrowed his eyes in Potter’s general direction, but didn’t have a great line of sight from his seat in the corner. He could only see Teddy, animated and excited, talking about Draco as if he wasn’t there. More than that, being adorably complimentary about it.

He supposed kids weren’t so bad. At least they didn’t come with any predisposed opinions about him, his family, or his past. Teddy simply saw him as a cousin with cool hair who didn’t like vegetables, which to be fair, was really all someone needed to know in order to make a reasonable character assessment.

“I’ve got bad news for you, bud,” Potter said. “There are definitely vegetables downstairs in the kitchen. And I’m pretty sure I saw your grandmother putting some on a plate for you.”

Teddy grumbled, distancing himself from Potter.

“I want cake,” he said, bottom lip jutting out in a truly impressive pout.

Potter held his hands up in defense. “Take that up with your grandmother. I’m not in charge around here.”

“But it’s your house,” Teddy said with a stomp, as if property ownership gave a man unlimited authority within his walls. Though technically, at Malfoy Manor and most other pureblood households, that was exactly the case.

Teddy switched targets, skipping back over to Draco and leveling him with a pleading stare.

“Draco, I want cake. Tell Uncle Harry I can have cake.”

Oh no.

Oh no.

Draco couldn’t tell if it was a trick of his metamorphmagus abilities or simply a gift of cuteness, but the wide, round eyes Teddy lobbed at him, mouth turned into a pout once again, completely dismantled any defenses Draco might have had towards reason.

“Potter, the kid wants cake.”

“Malfoy—” Potter started, sitting up. He sounded simultaneously stunned and exasperated.

Draco gave a shrug, already knowing he’d been played. He’d hardly put up a fight.

“What? He said he wants cake. I want cake, too. You know what, Teddy? Let’s go find some cake.”

He stood, gesturing for Teddy to follow and pointedly avoiding Potter’s eyes as they left the room.

Potter laughed and called out: “You can deal with Andromeda, then.”

As it turned out, Teddy had already had one slice of cake, and Andromeda did not take kindly to Draco smuggling him another.

It was a worthwhile endeavor, however. Draco and Teddy had a great time, sequestered in the corner of the kitchen, indulging in a sugar high, and discussing some of the finer points of Quidditch, such as: *it’s called a bludger, not a bugger, that’s a naughty word you shouldn’t say around your grandmother—or ever and no, the quaffle isn’t the most important ball just because it’s the biggest.*

—

“You seemed more relaxed once Teddy found you,” Hermione said as they stepped through the Floo and into Draco’s flat.

As it was a Friday, making the next day Saturday—*his day*—with her, Draco had high hopes of segueing his offer of late night drinks into an overnight stay. Heavy scheduling and a litany of commitments made slowing Hermione down long enough to stay the night a gargantuan task. He’d yet to have the honor, the pleasure, of having her spend the night in his bed. There was always a brunch she had planned or an out of town lecture she wanted to pop to before spending an afternoon with her parents or something else—anything, everything else, it sometimes seemed—that kept her away, kept her busy.

It bred an insecurity that Draco found decidedly distasteful and unnerving. It wasn’t as if they hadn’t been intimate. They might not have had an excessive amount of sex yet—*fucking schedule*—but it

wasn't as if he didn't know how she flushed when she came, how she'd bite her lip to near bleeding, how her attempts at coherency dissolved into babbles and desperate pleas for *more, yes, there* and a slew of pretty, unintelligible noises.

And it wasn't as if she'd never put her hands or her mouth on his cock, like he had no familiarity with the ridges of her soft palate and the desperate, dangerous things she could do with her tongue. And how she was eager, so eager, to learn every way she might steal his breath—smiling a wicked grin every time she discovered a new method.

They'd even showered together once: soap and skin and lazy kisses against too-cold tile as they risked injury and tricky positioning for the accolade of having fucked in the shower.

He didn't even want her to spend the night exclusively for sex. Sure, that would be nice, more than nice—mind-blowing, he assumed. But in the scant few opportunities he'd had to hold her in the afterglow of one or several orgasms, Draco discovered a newfound passion for having her in his arms, for burying his face in her curls, for pressing himself so close he could feel her heartbeat against his, everything else around them utterly silent as he imagined them syncing.

Draco's solution came in the form of a gift, an offering to show her that she meant something to him, that this was *something*, difficult as it may be to articulate. He found a lovely necklace in one of his family's many vaults, selected for its rubies, something suitably Gryffindor for the color of her soul. He checked it for dark magic himself, just to be sure that his gift would do no harm.

She may have been raised by muggles, may not have a lifetime of pureblood courting practices ingrained in her brain, but she was still a learned witch. She would know what it meant, to give and accept family heirlooms. She had to know that giving something like that meant his time horizon ran longer than he was comfortable admitting, truth be told.

"I like Teddy," he said.

"He's really fun. Harry loves being his godfather."

She unfastened her cloak, shrugging it from her shoulders. Draco took it, hanging it on the hook by the door as he shed his own outerwear as well. He guided her to the sofa and procured two tumblers and a bottle of firewhisky.

"I can't stay long," she told him. "There's a book signing at Flourish and Blotts tomorrow morning. I know it's your day, so I was hoping to head in early before we met for lunch."

He offered her a glass, eyes flicking to the drawer beside the sofa, where the necklace sat, waiting to be presented.

"I could come with you," he said, sitting beside her.

"Oh, that's kind of you to offer. But I was going to go as soon as they open, and then I wanted to take care of a few other errands while I'm out—"

"We could get breakfast and then go to the signing," he offered, treading dangerously close to a ledge it seemed increasingly likely she had no idea existed.

"I wouldn't want you to have to get up so early just to meet me—"

"I wouldn't have to meet you if you were still here and we went together."

He took a sip of his whisky to stifle the swell of frustrating nerves. He shouldn't be nervous. He had no reason to be. He and Hermione—they were something. They were close. This was a simple, easy conversation for a couple to have.

She stilled, staring at the drink in her hands, resting it against her leg. She blinked several times and looked up at him, mouth slightly parted into an 'O' shape.

"You mean—I could stay here?" She sounded genuinely confused.

His nerves vanished, burned away by the laugh bursting from his throat. He tried to hold it in; he had no intentions towards cruelty or humiliation. But the idea that such a thing could be surprising to her, well—there was something distinctly hilarious about it.

"Yes, Hermione. You could stay here."

She frowned, narrowing her eyes at him as she took her own sip of firewhisky. "You don't need to laugh. It's not like I've done—that before."

"Not for my lack of trying," he said into his drink and mostly under his breath, recognizing it for the idiocy it was as soon as he'd said it.

“Lack of trying? You’ve never even asked,” she said, setting her drink aside and scooting away. She crossed her arms: never a good sign for him.

“I—I’m sorry, do you mean if I had just said ‘Hermione, would you like to stay the night?’ you would have?”

“Well—yes. Maybe. I don’t know. This is the first time you’ve brought it up. I didn’t think you wanted me to—”

“Didn’t want you to? What? Spend the night? Share my bed? Of course I do.”

“How am I supposed to know that? You never said anything. You just—kiss me, and other things, and afterwards we talk or read or something and then—well, then I go back home.”

“You always made it sound like you *had* to go. You’re so busy all the time—”

“That’s not—Draco. I—” Her indignation, a physical tension holding her tight, loosened: shoulders dropping, hands unclenching. She rubbed a hand along the back of her neck. “It’s been a long day. It can be emotional for me, the anniversary.”

“I know,” he agreed, and the room felt off, unusual, out of sorts. If they had a fancy diagnostic spell for a mood being flipped upside down, he imagined his living room would register heavily with red runes. He knew just the thing to flip it back, to correct this strange shift between them.

He twisted, reaching for the table drawer. He pulled out a wide, flat, velvet jewelry box.

“I have something for you,” he said. If this didn’t tell her what he meant, he didn’t know what would.

She didn’t immediately reach for the box. He watched her swallow, eyes fixed on black velvet. He cracked it open, savoring the sound of her breath as it hitched.

But she didn’t reach for the necklace, either. He set the box down between them, lifting the gold chain with its dangling rubies from within.

“This was my great grandmother Theresia’s. I thought the rubies were

appropriate for you.”

She still didn’t move. He started to feel a bit ridiculous, wondering if he should ask that she turn so he could help her put it on.

“Draco, I can’t accept that.”

“What?”

“That’s—a family heirloom? It looks historic, and expensive. I couldn’t possibly.”

“Of course you can. I want you to have it.”

She stood from the sofa, hands flexing at her sides. She shook out her arms, took several steps away, pivoted, then returned, standing next to the coffee table.

The necklace grew heavy, a weight he wasn’t prepared to bear. He lowered his hands, jewelry resting in his lap as he looked up at her, not understanding, wishing he did, but also fearing what that meant.

“You can’t just— *I* can’t just. A family heirloom?” she asked again, as if it was some kind of inconceivable, wildly unbelievably concept to her.

She’d repeated herself, and he found himself doing the same.

“I want you to have it.”

Her mouth twisted into a shape foreign to him, one he had neither met nor catalogued. She laughed through a strained sort of grimace, hovering near a frown: a host of conflict born by her lips.

“Draco you can’t just give me a family heirloom—expensive, *historic* jewelry like I’m your—your—”

“My what?”

“Your girlfriend.”

If her words were a meteor and his chest its destination: she’d carved a crater where his heart used to beat and his lungs used to breathe.

“You—are my girlfriend.” He probably should have emphasized the *are*. But none of the words had emphasis. They tasted sour.

Her look of genuine, unfiltered confusion crumbled at the crater's still smoldering edges in his chest.

"I know you've joked about that before but—"

"What do you mean I've joked about—Hermione, I have never—wait." He had to stop. Impossibly, the crater grew deeper, wider, more cavernous. Hot fear, embarrassment, and something like shame spread from its borders: soaking him, drowning him. "Am I not your boyfriend? Are we not—what is happening right now?"

The necklace slipped from his lap, sliding to the floor with a metallic clatter. He made no move to retrieve it. Rubies on the floor should have been offensive, but he couldn't seem to bother with the offense.

He tried to speak again.

"What do you call this, then?" he asked, swallowing back the self-consciousness. She stood just there: three feet away, but impossibly far. "If it's not—a relationship," he faltered, stumbling over his words, "what is it?"

She didn't look at him. He watched as she chewed anxiously on the inside of her cheek, hands twisting and stretching her knit jumper. She'd stretch it too far if she kept going; she'd have to magic the knit together again, but it would never be the same. And if her charm ever failed—unlikely for her, but still possible—she'd have that same stretched bit of fabric, contorted from the stress she put it through now.

"Well that's the first time you've asked me, isn't it? We've—been enjoying ourselves. I thought you didn't want—and it's not like we could ever, with your parents. We could never be fully honest about—anything." Her words came out stunted, choppy.

"You said you didn't want to tell them, either." He meant to protest with force, his own indignation. But exhaustion pulled him down, pinning him under a trap she'd set months before. That thought sparked a wave of hot anger at being deceived.

She finally looked up at him, tearing her gaze away from the seat cushion that had held her attention. Draco hated how he wanted to comfort her, take away the watery look in her eyes, even when she was the one doing the hurting.

Why? He might not have the most extensive dating history—the most

recent of which took place on the other side of the continent—but he knew when he was in a relationship with someone. He had a day of the week. A whole day, his: a dedicated portion of her life. How was that not a relationship?

“It’s not that I’m not enjoying it—I am,” she said, taking a tiny step closer to him, arms halting halfway through the movement, like she meant to reach for him but thought better of it. “This just—it’s not real. It—it can’t be.”

That, above everything else, gutted him. Not real? Pretend, then.

His whole body flushed hot, surges of heat by the names of anger and shame and doubt and embarrassment battling to take up residence in the crater where so many lovely things used to live.

He stood.

He couldn’t do this. Handle this. He didn’t even feel compelled to occlude in order to survive it. He simply needed to leave.

He looked at her face just long enough to register that she’d started crying, jaw opening and closing as if she sought words she didn’t know how to verbalize.

She’d said enough. He didn’t want to hear any more of it. He couldn’t.

He didn’t say anything either, merely walked to the fireplace and Floo’d to Theo’s, leaving her alone in his flat.

—

Draco poured himself another drink, watching as Theo tried and failed—yet again—to break through a series of complicated Slavic wards protecting the door to the Nott family vault.

Theo made a frustrated noise, kicked the door for good measure, and then turned to Draco.

“You’re sure you don’t want a drinking companion? I can think of several better ways to spend a Friday night than trying to break into this impenetrable, fucking irritating vault.”

Draco shook his head and sank back against the settee, head heavy and limbs warm from the three shots he'd taken since barging into Theo's home.

"I want you to pretend like I'm not here. Do whatever you'd be doing if I never showed up."

He sipped his scotch, having switched to something more expensive and enjoyable now that he'd reached an acceptable level of drunkenness to simply—exist in his world as it was now.

"I would be yelling at this door and trying to teach myself the Cyrillic alphabet. Why did someone in my family think they needed to borrow ward-theory from the Slavs just to protect whatever's in here?" He kicked the door again, wincing. "You didn't pick up any Cyrillic during your mastery, did you?"

"Not a drop," Draco said, trying to keep his words steady despite the thick, fuzzy feeling in his mouth. "Can't read it, can't speak any of the languages that use it. I'm useless."

"That last bit seems like a lot to unpack, so I think I'll be ignoring it for now."

Theo turned back towards the warded door he'd been trying to break into for the last year. "Must be something worth protecting in there if they went through all this trouble, you know? When I finally get in—gods, it's going to be the best *fuck you* to my father for never showing me the wards."

"What do you think's in there?" Draco balanced his tumbler in the space between the settee's tufting buttons, too exhausted to manage the effort of holding it when not actively indulging.

"We've got plenty of gold and jewels and whatnot in our Gringotts vaults. So, I imagine it's dark stuff, experimental magic, maybe some ancient family grimoires. I don't fucking know, really. But it better be good. It's been almost five years of this. Between that fucking painting"—he turned his head, glaring at the painting on a hinge beside him—"and now this stupid door, I feel like I've spent half my life breaking these wards."

Draco ran his nail through the intricately carved designs in his glass, tracing the pattern to focus his attention.

"Five years. Right. Because it's still the anniversary."

Theo hadn't gone back to his curse breaking yet. He stood there, on the opposite side of the corridor, surrounded by books on ward theory and curse breaking scattered on the floor around him.

"How did your afternoon at Potter's go?"

"They mostly ignored me. I did the same. I hung out with Teddy for a while."

"Well, do you think because it's—you know, *the day* —that might have had something to do with the fight I assume you've had with Granger?"

Draco laughed.

"A fight."

He laughed some more. The noise careened through the long corridor, sounding as hollow as it felt.

"If that's what you call being told you were never in a relationship with someone you thought you'd been in a relationship with for—fuck." He couldn't finish the thought.

"Wait, she said what?" Theo stood very still across from him, grip on his wand flexing.

"What do you think it was? Did she need to get some kind of perverse Death Eater attraction out of her system? I suppose she was disappointed, then, that I glamour my mark every day. I'm—fuck I'm mortified, Theo. All this time I've been—" *falling for her* "—and she's just been, what? Using me for a good time? I don't understand."

Theo started towards the settee where Draco most certainly did not want company or comfort. He just needed Theo to—be Theo.

"Just break into your fucking vault, Nott."

Theo stopped in the middle of the corridor, watching Draco with a look so close to pity that it made him want to scream, throw something, take it out on Theo even though it wasn't his fault.

Theo cleared his throat and stepped away again.

"Right, well. I'll just be here trying to crack open the secrets to my family legacy that no one saw fit to include me in. Might as well be a little moody about it myself since that appears to be the general tone

of the evening.”

He summoned the scotch and took a swig straight from the bottle.

“I just want to know what’s inside,” Theo said. “And why my father never bothered to show me.”

“I don’t know. You might be better off with him never trusting you. That account Lucius gave me to manage? It’s officially losing money. One account, and I’ve fucked it up, too.”

Theo sent the bottle floating back across the hall.

“Just swallow your pride, would you?” he said. “Ask Blaise for help. You know he lives for investments.”

“In property. Specifically, properties that make wine.”

“Well, he still knows plenty about finances. It’s a plight of the nouveau riche, I assume. They have to know that kind of shit because they barely have a single generation worth of gold in their vaults.”

“I just wanted to be good at something my father actually wanted me to be good at.”

“You’re good at other stuff,” Theo said. It was the right thing to say, a kind, best friend sort of thing to say. It made Draco regret all the times he’d tormented Theo with the Malfoy peacocks when they were young.

“Not the right stuff.”

Minutes ticked by. Draco didn’t know how many. Time started blending and blurring as Theo fiddled with the Cyrillic alphabetic and a wall of complicated wards Draco didn’t have the first clue how to comprehend. Time stretched; it shrank. It waxed; it waned. Moments passed in minutes, maybe hours, all spent sitting on a settee and trying to discern if the tingling feeling in Draco’s toes came from poor circulation or an overindulgence in alcohol.

He wondered how long it was before Hermione left his flat. How long did she stay, standing there in the mess she’d made?

He wouldn’t go back that night. Theo had a literal abundance of guest rooms Draco could make use of. He had no desire to risk the chance that she tried to wait him out, offer some kind of pathetic excuse as to

how he'd been so idiotic, so presumptuous, to assume that because they did the things people do when they're in a relationship, they must have been in one.

While Theo fought with a particularly frustrating tangle of wards, Draco closed his eyes, engaging every ounce of his self-control to think of anything other than Hermione. He failed miserably.

His chest hurt. His head hurt. His vision spun.

—

The next week, he sent Topsy to keep an eye on Hermione and ensure the guest hall didn't kill her. Beyond that, he spent his time corresponding with Blaise about his failing investment accounts and revisiting the idea of opening his own potions business.

He needed something to occupy his time. Something to occupy his mind.

He'd forgotten to ask Topsy for her discretion. Not that she'd ever intentionally spill his secrets to Lucius, but evidently her occupation did not go unnoticed, and when asked where she spent all her time, she happily reported that she'd been filling in for Draco.

"An elf is no substitute for an actual *human* member of this household, Draco," his father had said, terse over dinner. "The elf isn't even bound to the estate any longer. It has no loyalties."

Draco might have given some paltry excuse about having other work to attend to. Might have defended Hermione's work ethic; they were under no threat of unprofessionalism from her. She'd been nothing but a consummate, eternal professional, aside from the part where she'd let him believe he'd been in a relationship with her. He might have even defended Topsy as something more than an *it*, as Lucius referred to her. But he did none of that. He accepted his scolding and left the dinner table as soon as his mother dismissed him.

Lucius made it abundantly clear that Draco's presence in the decommissioning process was required, whether he wanted to be there or not. It was a burden he would have to bear for his family—like all the others—no matter how much it hurt him to do so.

A week after everything went wrong, Draco waited in the parlor for Hermione's arrival. She froze as she exited the Floo and found him standing there, like before. This before and after differed vastly from the one they used to have. This one involved dreams and nightmares and the belief that he'd been in one, only to wake up and find himself in the other.

She parted her lips to say something, a half step of momentum bringing her towards him.

“Don't—Hermione. Please don't.”

They were the most difficult four words he'd ever had to force out. Unease slithered beneath the surface of his skin as he cut her off. Whatever she planned to say—platitudes or apologies or expressions of relief—he didn't want them.

He turned and left, heading to the guest hall, where he made himself comfortable on a settee as far from where she worked as possible. Pretending she wasn't there. Pretending he wasn't there. Pretending the last year wasn't there, lingering in his memory.

Chapter End Notes

so many thanks to my darlings [icepower55](#), [Endless_musings](#), and [persephone_stone](#) for all their beta'ing support!

and thank YOU so much for reading! i appreciate your comments and kudos and conversations you're having with me on social media SO much!! bit of an early post today, hope you don't mind ;)

ps: ginny is a better quidditch player than both harry and draco, because she is an actual professional, thank you very much. and she is generally annoyed that teddy regularly forgets that fact, blinded by his hero worship of his godfather xD

Chapter 18: -1.666, -1.750, -1.833

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

June

tick tock

“Do you have any idea how impossible it is to avoid someone you’re supposed to be supervising all day?” Draco asked, stepping into Nott Manor well before the end of the workday. He’d completely given up the facade of keeping an eye on Hermione for the afternoon. His simmering frustration had become far too much to handle.

“Well hello, and happy birthday. I take it we’re starting festivities early?”

Theo sat on the parlor floor with a book propped open in his lap. Several antique-looking keys sat on the coffee table in front of him, laid out in neat, precise rows. He didn’t look up from his work when he spoke.

It had been over a month since the argument Draco still didn’t fully understand—apart from the bit where it crushed whatever meager happiness he’d managed to build for himself—and he and Hermione had exchanged barely a handful of words in all the meandering in-between time. The mood between them froze with tension, laden with awkward, uncomfortable glances that prodded at the aching places inside Draco’s chest.

Sometimes, he wanted to kiss her so badly it downright startled him: desire careening from an unknown place inside his mind.

Even more than that—more alarming, too—he wanted to talk to her, hear her run through all the things on her schedule that week, hear how her progress towards the Eliot biography was going now that her shop had stocked an extra fifteen books she’d have to read. He wanted to hear about her day. Tell her about his. He wanted to make fun of her hair and then bury his face in it.

He was a fucking pathetic sap.

“She tried to give me a birthday present.”

Theo finally lifted his head: focus diverted from his keys and whatever strange experiment he had planned for them.

“How did that go?”

“I just—walked away.”

Theo poked at one of the keys with his wand, straightening it.

“I’m going to be honest with you, that doesn’t sound like the best way to handle yourself.”

“I fucking know, Theo. I can barely look at her. It’s like she’s not even bothered at all; she just does her work in that gods damned guest hall. I’m furious, all the time. I’m also paranoid she’s going to get hurt. But that doesn’t mean I want a birthday gift from her.”

Theo made a humming noise, one that sounded like it was meant to be an agreement, but had an edge of something else. Draco might not have picked up on it if he hadn’t known Theo since they were toddlers. But that hum wasn’t just acknowledgement. It was avoidance. It was something else.

“What?” Draco asked, voice tight with annoyance as he helped himself to an armchair. He realized he’d left his birthday toffees in the parlor at the manor. If Granger ate a single one of them he’d have her sacked. He’d find a way. He glanced at the Floo, wondering if it was worth it to try and sneak back for them. But that ran the risk of coming face to face with her as she’d almost certainly tried following him when he’d stormed off mid-gifting.

“*What*, what?” Theo asked, as if he had no idea what Draco meant by his question.

“What aren’t you telling me? Or what do you really want to say? You need to work on your tells.”

Theo prodded at another key on the table.

“She’s seemed—off, too.”

Draco’s back tensed against his chair. He regretted picking a seat behind Theo. All he could see was the back of his head, and he needed line of sight on Theo’s face. Draco needed to see exactly how much

guilt he'd find there.

"And you know because—you've seen her?"

"I've been seeing a guy I met while she and I were boyfriend hunting a couple of months ago. We already had an afternoon planned with her and—well, it seemed like a good opportunity to see how she's doing. She is my friend, too."

"Not your *lifelong* friend, she's not. And *she* knows about some guy you're seeing, but I don't?"

Theo whipped around, mouth tight despite the air of nonchalance he seemed desperate to project with his casual lean against the table.

"I'm not saying I'd ever pick her over you if I had to choose. You're my best friend when you aren't in moods like this. So technically, I *would* pick Blaise over you today. But from the way you're handling yourself—I was worried about her, too."

Draco gave into temptation. He felt the question forming inside his skull, coalescing into something he both did and did not want the answer to, but that he could not rest until he asked, pathetic as it made him.

"Did she—say anything about us? And what happened?"

"No. And trust me, I tried. But she definitely seemed off."

"Don't know why. She wasn't in a relationship, apparently. It's not like she lost anything."

Draco saw a flash of sadness cross Theo's face before he hid it, wrangling the mood in the room into something less depressing, more *Theo*.

"It's your birthday. Now is not the time for such conversations. What is your drink of choice for the occasion?"

Draco gave a noncommittal shrug, not quite willing to drum up the level of enthusiasm he knew Theo would require of him.

"Milly," Theo said, summoning one of his elves.

Crack.

"How is Milly of service, Master Theo?" the elf asked, nearly at eye

level with Theo where he sat.

“A variety of our best liquors, if you will, as well as the requisite accouterments. It’s Draco’s birthday, so we are willing to splurge.” He winked at the elf, as if they were engaged in some hilarious inside joke about liquor qualities. “Draco, any news from Tilly you’d like to share?”

“Ah, yes Milly—Tilly says hello and sends her regards for the upcoming solstice.”

Milly’s ears flushed a deep maroon. Her huge, round eyes gathered mist as she effused her thanks and *cracked* away to retrieve the requested alcohol.

—

The fifth room in the guest wing, and the last on the main level, presented enough of a challenge that Draco’s paranoia drove him to linger a little closer than usual. Not hovering, *per se*, but near enough that if something else attacked Hermione—as this particular hall had already demonstrated a propensity to do—he could assist, even if it meant interacting with her.

Hermione engaged in a great deal of frustrated huffing, loud sighs, and heavy footsteps. She was simply very noisy, constantly interrupting Draco’s attempts at leisurely reading or making sense of Blaise’s investment recommendations.

He snapped his notebook shut. If she planned on leaving the door wide open and making so much noise as she worked, then Draco would do the same.

He stood, wand drawn, and tried to conjure a Patronus.

Except, he couldn’t think of a memory to fuel it.

He thought first of Hermione’s mouth, how he loved kissing it, touching it, watching it as she thought or spoke. He thought of how her lower lip flushed from white to pink after she released it from between her teeth, constantly chewing on it as she considered something.

He couldn't use those memories.

He thought of her hair next. Absurd, ridiculous, semi-sentient as it was. He loved the delayed movement of her curls, mimicking her motion as momentum swirled them around her whenever she tilted or turned her head. They were soft and so easy to wind around his fingers.

But he could hardly use those memories, either.

He dug deeper, tried something different.

He thought of the day he was released from Azkaban after spending three months awaiting his trial. He'd spent his eighteenth birthday there, wondering if he'd spend the rest of them there, too, locked away in the middle of a forgotten ocean. But the Ministry pulled him out, gave him his trial, and sent him to the manor to serve two years of house arrest, calling him wayward, calling him misguided, calling him unfortunate, but never calling him evil.

He'd thought himself evil.

That relief, it filled him, but it didn't feel the same or nearly as powerful as his other attempts at conjuring a Patronus.

"Expecto Patronum."

Nothing happened, not even a flash of light.

He saw Hermione standing in the nearby doorway, watching him.

"I know you can do it," she said, a rare sentiment directed at him and not her work.

He laughed. For the first time, his instinct wasn't to run away from her words. But instead, to throw them back.

"Not likely. You've tainted every last memory I might have used."

She recoiled, perhaps from surprise that he'd actually engaged her or from the physical force of his words, snappish and annoyed. She brought her hand to the door frame, either steadying herself or holding herself in place, he didn't know.

"I—" she started, but stopped, swallowed. "You've been thinking of me?"

That shouldn't have embarrassed him. At least he didn't think it should. But warm shame tickled down the back of his throat.

He realized he still had his wand raised, as if delayed magic might still spill out of it. He let it fall to his side, shoulders dropping with defeat.

"You're supposed to think of your happiest memories, are you not?" He watched hand on the door frame. Her knuckles tensed, fingers flushing white from increased pressure.

"You can't hang all your happiness on me," she said, voice quiet, almost silent.

It felt like a nightmare again, like none of this was real. Or perhaps, like this was the first time any of it was real and everything leading up to this had been a bizarre, whirlwind of a dream. Time slipped strangely through the cracks between words. He couldn't tell if it moved too quickly or nowhere near quick enough. He'd almost forgotten that she spoke.

He laughed again, but with more hollowness this time. His eyes didn't move from her hand, still resting on that door frame, anchoring him in place more than anything else.

"Well—you can't let a man think he's in a relationship with you for nearly half a year. So, I suppose we're both doing things we shouldn't."

In that moment, he wished more than anything that he could produce a Patronus purely powered by spite. He had that in spades, plenty to go around and enough left over to cast some truly powerful magic.

She had a lot of nerve. He wasn't allowed to be in a relationship with her, not a *real* one anyway. And apparently, even when he thought he was, he shouldn't have been using the happiness it brought him to try and fuel his magic.

What other things was he not allowed? How much more did she want to take from him?

He pocketed his wand, refusing to look at her face. His chest ached. His bones hurt.

He needed a drink.

He needed space.

He needed to wake up from this fucking nightmare.

“Theo, I don’t care that it’s your birthday. I’m going to kill you.”

Draco grabbed Theo by the upper arm, yanking him from the booth where they’d been sitting with Blaise, getting solidly drunk for Theo’s birthday.

Theo stumbled out of the booth, teetering on wobbly legs as his coordination sagged under the weight of their celebration. He pulled Theo out the Leaky’s back door, next to the entrance to Diagon Alley, and resisted the urge to hex a man on his birthday.

“What the fuck is Granger doing here?”

To Theo’s credit, he looked shocked, then sufficiently contrite.

“I invited her before—probably two months ago. I didn’t know she’d come,” Theo said, turning to peer back inside the pub.

“Well, she’s here, you utter fuck. You didn’t think to rescind the invitation since she—you know.” He gestured vaguely to himself, wanting to melt into the brick wall behind him.

“How do you know she’s here?” Theo asked, pausing on a hiccup. He swayed. “I don’t even see her.”

“She’s here. I saw her walk in. She’s hard to miss.”

“For you maybe—oh, yes. There she is.”

She stood directly in front of the window Theo had been craning to gaze through. She pulled the door open and stopped on the threshold, greeting Theo with a small smile playing on the lips Draco had spent so much time trying to erase from his memory.

“Hello, Theo. Happy birthday.”

She held out a small package. Theo glanced sideways at Draco, almost as if he needed permission to take it. After a beat, Theo reached out anyway, accepting the gift.

“Thanks, Granger,” he said. He leaned in, gave her a quick kiss on the cheek, and then slipped by her, mumbling something about drinks.

He’d abandoned ship before Draco even had the opportunity to consider the depths of his mutiny.

“I just came to give Theo his gift,” Hermione said, taking a small step forward, then aborting the move when he tensed. He’d been cornered in a fucking back alley. “I was hoping I’d see you though—outside of work. If we could talk—”

“Merlin—fuck, Granger. No, we can’t fucking talk. There’s nothing to say.”

He spun, wand out, and tapped on the appropriate bricks to open the entry to Diagon Alley. He slid through as soon as the space grew wide enough to let him pass. This late in the evening, the shops would be closed, and he could hopefully slip away to some empty alleyway, rip out his hair, and regain control over his heartbeat in peace.

Behind him, he heard the clack of her shoes against the cobblestone street. She’d followed. Of course she followed. She was tenacious and stubborn and clearly bent on torturing him. Was sadism a Gryffindor trait?

He didn’t look back.

“Go away, Granger.”

“Stop calling me that. You’re being so unreasonable,” she called from behind him, slightly breathless. He had long legs; he imagined she had trouble keeping up. He smiled at that.

“It’s your name.” He threw his words over his shoulder, not really looking at her.

“You stopped calling me that ages ago.”

“Not true.”

“Fine,” she relented, something defeated and annoyed in her tone. “You stopped saying it like *that* ages ago.”

He stopped, sucking in a deep breath as he pinched the bridge of his nose. He spun to face her just as she came to a halt far too close to him.

“Why are you following me, *Granger?*”

“Can you please be an adult and just talk to me?” she asked, mouth pressed thin as she crossed her arms.

Draco never realized how dark Diagon Alley became after all the shops closed up for the day. There weren't nearly as many street lamps as he assumed there were, and even those were dim and flickering. He'd stopped at the midpoint between two of them, directly in front of Eeylops Owl Emporium. Wide owl eyes blinked at him from a darkened window. He could hear a ruckus coming from another pub around the corner. And yet, he felt very much alone with her. He really, desperately did not want to be alone with her.

All his avoidance, all his deterrence, shifted into anger at her indignation.

“Be an adult? Fuck off, Granger. You don't get to imply I'm not an adult because I don't want to be constantly tortured by you. I have to spend most of my time with you. Is it not enough that I can't fucking escape you?”

He turned, intent on storming away, but halted. He flexed his hands, ground his jaw, nearly growled when he heard her start to rebut with something undoubtedly clever and cruel and uncalled for.

“And you know what else, Granger?” he said, turning back to her. He felt a furious flood seeping from between his ribs, and it was an excellent, vindicating feeling. “You're delusional. You know that? You introduced me to your friends. You took me as your date to one of the most prominent weddings *ever*.”

He advanced on her; she didn't get anonymity by distance. He would see her reaction to the truth she'd clearly tried so hard to forget.

“You let me hold you,” he continued. “Touch you, fuck you. Make you come over and over and over again. You spent your spare time with me. Gave me a whole day of the week in your insane schedule. You said I'd done enough to show you I was sorry and that I didn't need to apologize.”

He stood too close now, feeling like a predator, like he'd trapped her. Her jaw hardened, brows a furious, straight line projecting annoyance and confidence. But he saw each blow as it landed, chipping away at whatever her version of mental wards was. Not Occlumency, she didn't know that particular brand of magic. But something else,

equally as stubborn. And if he had to guess, likely brute-forced by sheer discipline of intent, because that was the Hermione Granger way.

“I blew up my fucking betrothal for you. I don’t understand how you can possibly think we weren’t in a relationship. You’re way too smart for that. So what I don’t understand is why you’re being such a bitch about the thing you’ve already ruined. Just let me nurse my broken fucking heart in peace.”

He hated himself the moment he said it. Too much, too far, too cold. He’d been far too mean and far too vulnerable all at once. He was mad at her, yes, very much so. And he wanted to hurt her: a little, some. But—gods, now he only felt tired. Exhausted from laying it all out, onto her. He’d raised his voice, too, he could still feel it echoing around them, propelled by angry magic that carried a touch more sadness than he cared to admit.

She clenched her jaw, looking furious. Then it faded, something sadder. “You’re being cruel. But—you’re not entirely wrong.”

He’d just called her a bitch. She wasn’t allowed to agree with him.

“I fumbled my words,” she said. “I honestly wasn’t sure what you wanted—from me, us—because we’d never talked about it and then that jewelry—I didn’t handle it well, alright? It scared me, and all I could think about were your parents and how they’d never approve of me, and it all felt so hopeless.”

Draco bit his tongue, quite literally, to stop himself from interrupting. She stared at his shirt collar, dim streetlamp turning her normally deep brown eyes a bright copper: glassy as she spoke.

“I was already kind of strung out—the anniversary does that to me. And then I knew I’d hurt you, and I didn’t know how to fix it. And you just left; you wouldn’t talk to me. So then I got even more upset and —”

She ran a hand through her curls, making a strangled noise of frustration as her fingers got tangled up in it. In about any other situation, Draco would have thought that adorable, would have kissed her annoyance away. But as it stood, he just wanted his chest to stop aching and this conversation to end.

“I’ve never wanted jewelry before, okay? It’s never even crossed my mind as something I might like. And I never accepted or asked for any

from Ron. But I was scared because I wasn't entirely opposed to the idea—from you. I was afraid of what that meant—you offering and me accepting. The uncertainty, all the possible outcomes. It's all so overwhelming. My parents have just—a perfect relationship. Even your parents seem like they do. Molly and Arthur, James and Lily Potter, Harry and Ginny, they're all so perfect—”

“Did you do this to Weasley, too?”

The question burst from him as suddenly as he'd thought it. She didn't even seem to register he'd spoken at first, still barreling through her list of perfect relationships, and all the ways that clearly made her wildly insecure. An inkling of understanding trickled through his veins.

“What?” she said, finally recognizing his question. “No, Ron and I weren't really all that compatible—”

“Are you so afraid of failing that you'd rather not try?”

Her eyes widened. Despite that bolt of confirmation, all Draco could feel was the weight of hypocrisy hanging over him. How many conversations with his own loved ones had he avoided because he was afraid of the answer?

The question of blood purity as it related to his parents came to mind.

He knew that kind of coping mechanism. He understood it. He'd hidden behind it for far longer than he ever should have, and he still did with some issues.

It wasn't quite the same as staring at fried zucchini blossoms and feeling his Occlumency crumble, but more like he finally gave himself permission to acknowledge the unspoken thing hovering in his periphery, a shadow just out of sight, a word on the tip of his tongue.

Her rejection hurt him so much because he was in love with Hermione Granger.

In love with her.

He'd never been in love before.

It hurt more than he expected. There was more fear involved, too. But also, a level of certainty, of calm that came with accepting it.

The nightmare shifted, sharply, into a dream again: better, but still unreal and unnervingly repetitious. He'd been here before, done this before. On a different birthday—hers—but the place was the same. In acknowledgement of that sameness, in remembering what had happened last time they stood there, something like peace settled over him, smothering his anger, soothing his hurt.

She still hadn't answered him. He imagined she didn't know how. She was a woman of contradictions, even he could see it. Surely she did, too. With a Gryffindor tendency to jump into something headfirst, but a paralyzing fear of failure that she managed with effort and discipline and a schedule that left no room for error; it was no wonder they'd ended up here.

"Do you remember when you said you could be friends enough for the both of us until I figured myself out?" He'd softened: shoulders, voice, soul. She responded to it, tension unwinding, death grip on her lower lip loosening.

She nodded, evidently too trapped in her own head to speak.

"I suppose I could be in love enough for the both of us until you figure yourself out."

They stood there, in the quiet, until Theo came, stumbling and drunk, to find them. It broke the silent understanding they'd formed.

She'd waited for him.

He could wait for her.

Chapter End Notes

[icepower55](#), [Endless_musings](#), and [persephone_stone](#) are my heroes. thank you endlessly for your support!

and thank YOU so much for reading and for leaving me comments and kudos and yelling at me on discord and tumblr. i can't say this enough; it is the most fun, most lovely experience getting to write this and interact with y'all. i appreciate you all SO much!!

Chapter 19: -1.583, -1.666, -1.750

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

July

tick tock

With five of nine rooms in the guest hall decommissioned—the entirety of the main level—July began with a trip underground, to the small lower level that contained the guest wine cellars. When Draco originally recounted to Hermione the number of rooms in the hall, he'd included the cellar as a single entity. As his shoes clacked and echoed off the stone stairs when he stepped onto the landing, it became apparent that he might have undersold the size of the space.

He could feel Hermione's frustration in the annoyed breath she released, peering through the glass walls encasing the front of the cellar. Narcissa had been so proud of the lovely, modernizing renovation they'd done. Now, it felt out of place: clear glass, empty wine racks, and no indication as to whether or not anything nefarious lurked inside.

At least Draco would be able to see Hermione while she worked.

They hadn't quite reached a place where he participated again, but that didn't stop the worry for her safety from swallowing him whole now that he'd admitted that he was in love with the witch.

Loving her was an inconvenient thing.

To use Hermione's terminology, they'd slipped back into something of a Cold War: neither of them sure how to proceed without setting off an unmanageable chain reaction. She tried explaining something called mutually assured destruction the other day, but Draco lost his focus, thinking instead of how soft her curls were and how badly he wanted to touch them again.

But he could wait, *would* wait, until she sorted through whatever it was that had her so scared of trying anything with him. He presented her with tiny offerings instead.

"I'll tell them, if you want me to," he said as she began dismantling the wards that kept the cellar door sealed shut.

She paused, but didn't turn.

"Tell who, what?"

He chuckled, watching as her grip tightened on her wand, tension traveling from her wrist, up her arm, and into her shoulders.

"As if you haven't already considered every possible iteration of what I meant," he said. "I'm just letting you know. If that's the price, to put you at ease that this is worth something to me. I'll tell my parents we're in a relationship."

He saw the faint image of her outline reflected in the glass cellar door. He watched her face, uncertain if she realized the reflection exposed her.

"You would do that?"

"Not now, of course. Since we're not *in* a relationship, presently. But if we ever were..." He kept his tone light, as unaccusatory as he could. He meant to bring levity.

She spun, eyes wide as she looked at him. Perhaps she'd been expecting anger, or sadness, or for him to look at her the way he had all throughout June, when all he could think about was how much she'd hurt him. When she didn't find that—because he'd really, truly only meant it as a passing technicality, perhaps a subtle reminder of what he'd like for them to be—she softened.

"And I'm sorry," he added, knowing he had to say it. If he meant it, he had to say it, especially to her. "Which may or may not be enough, but I am. I shouldn't have shut you out, shouldn't have lashed out. It has occurred to me that my perception of you being entirely unaffected might have simply been your eternal professionalism in the workplace."

She considered him. "Thank you," she said, watching for a moment longer before turning back to her work.

"You may want to practice your Patronus some more," she added, tone matching his in lightness. It almost felt playful, like banter he knew. "I suspect this room might take a while."

He smirked, purposefully catching her eye in the glass this time, enjoying this moment of ease. *Gods*, he'd missed this.

"Would you like me to call Theo to assist?"

She didn't look especially amused, but she laughed all the same.

—

Draco hated Patronuses. He hated seeing them. He hated trying to cast them. He hated every gods forsaken happy thought he was meant to think in making one. He hated that apparently he wasn't allowed to *hang his happiness* on Hermione and use that to fuel his magic, whatever the fuck that meant.

He generally hated how his days were shaping up. Day after day of failing to produce a Patronus while watching from behind the glass cellar walls as Hermione worked, floating runes leading her from shelf to shelf as she siphoned dark magic from the room.

He'd run through damn near every memory he had, every feeling he could think of, and none of them came anywhere close to the pathetic flashes of light he'd managed when thinking about her skin and her lips and her hair and her eyes.

He groaned. Their Cold War might be warming again—or wait, wasn't that bad? He had trouble keeping track, it honestly made no sense—but the divide between them remained.

He reached for another memory: Quidditch at Hogwarts. He honed in on how it felt to fly, wind whipping through his hair, stinging his cheeks, chapping his lips. Control and precision and freedom in the sky. The jolt, the utter thrill, in a glint of fluttering gold: his heart beating as fast as the snitch's wings in his pursuit.

And his father, in the stands. Watching him. Judging him. Expecting success, and then, of course, Draco failed.

His magic withered. The warm tendrils that had surged from his center recoiled, desiccating in the sour, ashen memory of loss and disappointment. He didn't even bother with the incantation; it would not work.

Every time, that was the problem. Most of his memories—most of his life—had been spent in pursuit of being a good son in his father's eyes, of achieving whatever barely-achievable task his father set before him and doing everything in his power to reach it.

The good memories, the ones where he came the closest to casting something that could generously be called a Patronus Charm, always stopped too soon: second in class behind Hermione Granger, second best Seeker behind Harry Potter, would-be assassin to Albus Dumbledore—dubious honor usurped by Severus Snape.

A purple glow pulled his attention. Through the glass between them, he saw Hermione emerge from the small humid room attached to the cellar, runes happy and purple. A faint smile pulled a curve at her lips; how she could find enjoyment in forcibly cleansing dark magic from the estate eluded him.

She glanced up, catching his look. Her lips quirked higher, a silent hello in the shape of a smile. He couldn't decide if he liked this sudden realization that he was in love with her. It all seemed awfully difficult a situation to be in. But in little moments like this, where a tiny pull at the corners of her mouth could tense every muscle inside his chest, cause his heart to hammer, he couldn't deny the thrill—not unlike flying.

She looked away, returning—as always—to her work.

He needed a different memory. Something else. Not one of her, and not one that could find its way back to his father, or the manor, or the war, or the general sense of inadequacy he couldn't shake. Existential crises did not make for stable Patronuses.

There wasn't much in his life that didn't involve those things, though, and therein lay his assertion, from day one, that he would never cast a successful Patronus.

Then it hit him. He realized he did have a memory, a year of them, that had nothing to do with Hermione or his family or his past. He thought of his mastery, of Sarajevo, of feeling like he could be more, be better.

He felt his magic swelling, warm and calm. It radiated from his chest, seeking an exit in his extremities.

“Expecto Patronum.”

He spoke clearly, carefully, and with a precise wand movement that would have impressed even the great Hermione Granger.

Yet, when he opened his eyes, all he saw was a faint glow at the tip of his wand, white light already fading out.

The cellar door opened.

“Draco, that was amazing—the first light I’ve seen from you since—” she broke off. They both knew how long it had been and why. It didn’t bother him though, not with the look of true joy crinkling the corners of her eyes as she beamed.

“Don’t worry, I wasn’t thinking of you.”

A muscle in her cheek twitched, smile taking on a strained quality.

“That’s good,” she said, and he wasn’t sure why he’d even mentioned it at all.

He’d wanted her to know he’d listened, he’d *heard* her. He wasn’t hanging all his happiness on her. But she seemed disappointed by that idea, and that didn’t make sense.

She still held the handle to the cellar door, which hinged slightly open. It would make for a quick retreat if he told her to go. He wondered if she expected him to.

“What were you—I mean, sorry, no that’s so intrusive of me to ask.” She pulled the door fully open again.

“A muggle.”

Her fingers slipped from the handle, glass pane closing.

“What?”

Hermione looked confused, truly and genuinely baffled, with her brows pulled tight together, mouth dropped open, eyes wide and searching him. A confused Hermione Granger, most of the time, looked barely befuddled. She usually had some idea, or several ideas, about the thing that confused her, solutions winding their way across her face. But this look, she had no ideas to unravel it.

“I was thinking about my mastery, in Sarajevo. It was the first time I realized I wasn’t pretending.”

“Pretending at what?” she asked, voice barely a whisper.

Something about what he planned to say felt insidious, disallowed in this place. The cool, damp stone walls seemed to reach out to him, slicking him with unease. For some reason, it made him want to say it all the more.

“That blood supremacy didn’t mean anything to me. It’s not like I hadn’t already had my entire belief system shattered in the war. But one doesn’t just”—he struggled to articulate—“change overnight.” He paused. Every word felt cheap, unsatisfactory, a knut when a galleon was the price. “Or even in the two years I spent isolated in this manor, rethinking those ideas.”

Hermione swallowed; he watched the line of her throat. Why hadn’t he told her this before? It seemed so important, suddenly, that she know how he came to where he stood now. He’d even apologized three months earlier, pathetic as it had been, but he gave her no context, no reason to believe him even though she insisted his actions meant more than his words.

“By the time I left for my mastery, I told myself I could pretend. While I was away, I could wear a different skin, be someone else, someone who didn’t care or know anything about the Sacred Twenty Eight, who had nothing to do with the war.”

“And you were pretending,” she said. “But then you weren’t?”

“I realized I wasn’t exactly pretending when I had my hand up some muggle girl’s skirt in a pub toilet—”

“A muggle?”

“Yes, Hermione. A muggle.” Draco drew in a sharp breath. *Right*. This was why he hadn’t told her. It felt so real, so big, so important somehow, telling her like it meant something.

But it hadn’t meant anything. He’d been drunk. He got her off in a filthy fucking bathroom that for some reason had stalls with no doors and no toilets, just holes in the ground. By the time she’d given him a lazy-arsed hand job in return, the line of people waiting to piss had started blending with the crowd around the bar trying to order their drinks.

It had been an all around unsatisfactory experience that had nothing to do with her blood status, the lack of magic in her veins. The general

aroma of piss had rather put him off. But he'd been horny and drunk and snogging a pretty girl who had no idea who the fuck he was, and that had been the best rush he'd felt in years.

He released an uncomfortable breath when Hermione gave him a soft smile, returning to her work without further question. He'd almost forgotten how good she could be at that, knowing when to push and when to give him space. He'd counted it once as a reason why they could be friends, when really, it was a reason they could be so much more.

—

Hermione invited him to spend an afternoon at the muggle bookstore with her. On a Saturday. It felt so much like success, like progress, that it took a substantial amount of self-control not to burst into a satisfied smirk as she posed the question.

“Do you have any plans tomorrow, Draco?” she'd asked at the end of an uneventful week clearing the cellar.

Her question stopped him mid-Patronus attempt, wand motions suddenly aborted, words on his tongue swallowed back. The happiness he'd curated, gathering in his bones, remained.

She looked nervous, not quite meeting his eye as she stepped through the cellar door and into the landing. She had a small package wrapped under her arm, and an unflattering smear of dirt or ash streaking across her forehead. But only her question bore any significance to him.

“Not as of yet, no.” He spoke carefully, simply, afraid he might scare her off with too much enthusiasm. She had a skittish look about her sometimes, like a wary animal in the wild.

“I was thinking of stopping by the bookstore—the one in muggle London. If you wanted to come.”

He forced himself to count his breaths—he managed three whole inhales—before he answered, lest he spew his excitement before she even finished her question.

“Yes,” he said. “I’d love to.”

She blinked, drawing her lip between her front teeth before immediately releasing it, as if she thought better of that action. Did she know how often she did it? How he liked to watch? He rather hoped not; his fascination with her lips likely bordered on obsession, and it wasn’t as if she’d responded to his declaration of love in an especially favorable manner.

And by that, he meant that she had barely any reaction at all, and still didn’t. They didn’t bring it up; he didn’t mention it, and neither did she. They simply worked through their Cold War. Each day, conversation a little less forced, eye contact maintained a fraction longer, lingering hurt evaporating into the ether.

“What’s the package?” he asked, shifting the conversation as she rocked awkwardly on the balls of her feet.

“Oh, just something to turn into the Ministry.”

“Turn into the—what?”

“A cursed object,” she said, blinking up at him with the most matter-of-fact tone in her voice. “I can’t decontaminate it, so I’m turning it over.”

“You’re taking something from the manor?” *Merlin—fuck*, had Lucius Malfoy *actually* been onto something?

“I—yes? Why are you surprised by this?”

She stepped around him and shrunk the object with an easy incantation, sliding it into her satchel’s outside pocket.

He tried to remain calm, unaffected. But confusion battered at the inside of his skull, seeking understanding. She didn’t seem concerned; she seemed casual, flippant even.

“Have you—” he started, tamping down the accusatory tone that scratched at his throat. “Have you done this—before?”

Her head tilted, recognition flared in the way her eyes, just for a moment, widened.

“A few times,” she said. “I’m sorry; I didn’t realize you were unaware.” Their roles had reversed, she now spoke with a careful,

measured tone. He felt like the skittish animal that might bolt at too sudden a movement.

She continued, “There is a small category of illegal objects, in addition to a clause about those that are irreparably damaged, that require removal. I turn them over to the Ministry. So long as the traceable magical history in the objects falls during or before the war, and they aren’t a Class A infraction; they have no impact on your father’s existing sentencing. I haven’t found anything that would extend his—”

“You think that’s what I’m worried about?”

“I don’t know what you’re worried about. You’re not really saying anything.”

He didn’t know *what* to say. He didn’t know if he should feel offended on behalf of his father, on behalf of his family estate, that the Ministry still saw fit to unilaterally decide what of their property the Malfoys were allowed to keep. Nor did he know if he should feel offended that she hadn’t told him about it—that she assumed he simply knew but never mentioned when she took something, *turned it over*, as she said.

“I didn’t realize you were taking things from the Manor. Don’t you think that falls under defiling the estate?” He wasn’t sure if he meant it as a joke.

In the quiet, almost-silence following his words, she tilted her head, evidently also unsure if he meant it in jest.

“It’s really only been a few things. This estate received the most attention from the Auror Division immediately after the war; they already found a good deal of it with their cursory sweeps.” She glanced down at her satchel, resting on the stone floor. “Would you prefer that I return the poisoned bottle of wine I found to the cellar?”

He couldn’t tell if she meant *that* as a joke, either. He felt like he’d entered a strange loop, lobbing words and measuring how they landed while he waited for her to return her own responses for evaluation. Both of them hoping they got the meaning right.

He wondered if they were even *talking about* what they were talking about anymore.

The surprise wore off. The sharp stab of new, unexpected information had found its place amongst his understanding of her job, of their dynamic. And without that shock, he could see clearly. She wouldn’t

defile the estate. She wouldn't abuse her power. She was incorruptible and he could trust her.

"I'll put it back," she said, brows drawing together. "If it matters that much to—you. It's just poisoned wine. It's not an enormous threat. Don't drink it, obviously."

"Would you get in trouble for that?" Perhaps she was less incorruptible than he thought. But he supposed it was easy to forget that she'd broken into Gringotts and ridden a fucking dragon during her days as a war heroine. Such a contradiction, this woman.

One corner of her mouth pulled up, bunching her cheek. He saw her biting at the inside of her lip, trying to staunch the smirk.

"Only if they find out." A pause, a breath, a declaration. "I trust you not to say anything."

He really missed kissing her.

"I trust you not to defile the estate. If you need to take it, take it."

She allowed herself the smile then, breaking across her face with the force of sunlight spilling over the horizon, lighting up his darkness.

He really, really missed kissing her.

"Tomorrow?" she asked. "The bookstore?"

"I wouldn't miss it for the world, Granger."

That feeling, the warmth inside his chest at the idea that she wanted to spend time with him, *on a Saturday*, outside of the manor, carried him through the estate as he bid her farewell in the Floo parlor. Then, out of curiosity, he tried casting a Patronus, giving himself permission to think of her again, just once, instead of clinging to the scant other memories that qualified for the spell's emotional needs.

The light he conjured, stronger than any he'd ever managed before, looked a little bit like hope, and a lot like his undoing.

Hermione made a frustrated, growling sound from the back of her throat as she stood on her tiptoes, reaching for a new book.

“Who even is Gertrude Ederle, and why is my shop suddenly stocking so many new biographies? I’m never going to get to—”

She whipped around, facing Draco. Honestly, it surprised him how long she took to put those pieces together. He could only assume that the disquiet between them had diverted her mission towards TS Eliot and distracted her enough that she didn’t notice the sudden abundance of biographies on public figures whose surnames began with the letter ‘E.’

“What did you do?” she asked, pointing at him with the biography in question.

“Ensured that my ancestral, antique furniture stays in my possession.”

The smirk was necessary, absolutely essential in that moment. Though it did not appear to help.

She released a frustrated huff, gestured towards him with the book again, and then spun back to the shelves.

He heard her murmuring something, talking to herself in annoyance, and all he wanted to do was kiss that frustration away, pin her against these shelves, like he’d done not so long ago, but long enough that he ached for it again.

“Thirteen?” she said, louder now, actually intelligible. She turned back on him, taking two displeased stomps closer. “Thirteen books before I get to Eliot—how?”

He shrugged, casual, unaffected. Gods, he’d missed riling her. And she’d stepped so close to him; he wondered if he had enough gravity to pull her in the rest of the way.

“How I do most things: money.”

She smacked him square in the chest with the book. He recoiled, rubbing at his sternum, a broad smile on his face.

“Your inclinations towards physical violence are a tad alarming, Granger. Do you not have a more productive way to channel your anger?”

She sucked in a huge breath, eyes narrowed as she looked down at the book. He wasn't sure if that focus meant she wanted to purchase it or to use it as a weapon again.

"You," she said.

"Me?"

"You are so annoying."

"Yes, and your hair is doing an excellent impression of a pygmy puff."

That, of all things, seemed to cool her ire. Her eyes relaxed. He stretched his luck.

"Annoying you has always been, and will always continue to be, some of the most fun I've ever had," he said, closer to raw honesty than he'd intended, but the words were gone now, slipped past his teeth and towards her brain.

"Even when—well, now that we're not exactly—" she failed to finish her sentence, words broken off as she stumbled through her acknowledgement of their strange, in-between situation.

He'd once spent the better half of a year ignoring the impulse to kiss her when it struck him. He'd held back enough.

So when the thought crossed his mind; he gave in.

He let her gravity pull him towards her, closing the gap between them. He barely brushed her cheek with his lips, relishing the way her hands immediately grappled at his shirt, fisting the fabric.

He placed a tiny kiss against her cheek, then hovered in her space.

"Are we not?" he asked, letting his breath coast across her neck. He wound an arm around her when she shivered, lining her body up with his. He could hardly contain the flood of want, of recognition over how much he'd missed touching her, holding her.

He kissed just beneath her ear, his own knees unsteady as one of her hands snaked up his chest, running along his neck to the base of his skull. Gods, he'd missed her touch: tiny *incendios* in her fingertips.

He brushed his tongue along the shell of her ear, savoring her whimper that may well have been the incantation for fiendfyre from the way it erupted a firestorm in his chest.

“Because,” he started, abandoning his torture of her ear and neck. He rested his forehead against hers, eyes closed as he enjoyed the sheer power of proximity. “It feels like we might be.”

“It was unfair of me to bring up your parents after telling you I didn’t want them to know, either,” she said, whispers against his lips, barely spoken. He’d sometimes wondered, in moments like this, if they’d invented a new kind of magic, where closeness made terrible conversations easier, comforted by touch. “You were right about that and I’m sorry. I see most things as pass or fail. I don’t do failure very well.”

He opened his eyes, watched her face.

“And you decided we would fail?”

“It felt inevitable. Especially when I didn’t know exactly where we stood.”

He sighed. “I think I’m so used to you knowing everything I assumed you knew how I felt, that you knew what I was thinking.”

She laughed, the motion pulling her away. He clung to her, keeping her close, pressed flush against him. He intended to trade as many secrets and whispered confessions against her lips as she would let him.

“I’ve told you before that you’re difficult to figure out,” she said. A pause. She swallowed. He watched her wet her lips with the tip of her tongue. She spoke again. “And how *do* you feel? What you said before.”

“Inconveniently in love with you.”

“Inconveniently,” she repeated.

“You’re hardly making it easy on me.”

She made a lovely, whining noise as she pulled his mouth to hers. It was just as magnificent, just as orbit shifting as he remembered. Instead of caging her in, against a wall or shelf as he so often liked to do, she pushed this time, awkwardly forcing him backwards until he came into contact with the shelf behind him.

He committed himself to memorizing the shape of her mouth. His catalogue had grown foggy, a blur obscuring detail in the absence of

constant stimulus and reaffirmation. She still blinked her eyes open to meet his whenever he captured her bottom lip between his teeth. She still melted closer, grip on him tightening, when he trailed his fingers down her throat, tongue brushing hers as he deepened their kiss. She still tasted so sweet, so soft.

She relearned him, too. Forcing a rumble from his chest when she dragged her nails down the back of his neck. He cursed the fact that they were in the middle of muggle London. He wanted—needed—to apparate them away right then and there, straight to his flat and, ideally, his bedroom.

A quiet but pointed throat clearing wrenched Draco from the kiss.

He looked up.

Hermione had pushed them directly into the shopkeeper's line of sight. She sprang back, flattening herself against the shelf opposite him, conveniently hidden from the nonverbal admonishment Draco received via one very disappointed look.

He arched a brow at the shopkeeper. He'd paid hefty to stock a number of books that would never have sold otherwise; Draco felt he could be allowed a liberty or two.

Hermione had flushed pink, a hand pressed to her mouth, likely suppressing an embarrassed sound.

Draco smirked at the shopkeeper. He spoke loudly, clearly, and with intent to be heard by both Hermione and their unintentional voyeur.

"Thirteen books, you said? Let's go ahead and grab them, then. I'm sure the shop will restock with even more options by next week."

Chapter End Notes

so much beta love to [icepower55](#), [Endless_musings](#), and [persephone_stone](#). this story is just...long. and they continue to work tirelessly on it and i appreciate them so much!

i know i say it every time, but thank you so much for reading! it continues to blow me away that folks are reading this story and enjoying this adventure with me! thank you so much for reading it, and sharing it, and chatting with me about it! <3 <3

Chapter 20: -1.500, -1.583, -1.666

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

August

tick tock

“It bit me.”

Draco would have loved to say those words came out strong, that his voice carried even, controlled, and devoid of unreasonable worry.

But all he could think, after the words left his mouth, was how similar his voice sounded to the time that great bloody Hippogriff had tried to maim him.

Hermione had given him one shelf. *One shelf* with one measly yellow rune to handle, and he'd clearly done something incorrectly, because the lattice work frame meant to house rows and rows of expensive wines had splintered and surged, goring his right hand with several wooden shards. He supposed technically that meant the shelf had stabbed him, not bit. But biting was the first word that came to mind when the sting of pain shot up his arm and blood welled in his palm.

Hermione appeared at his side, wand drawn, already extracting the splinters from his hand.

“Oh, yes. This has been happening a lot in here,” she said, an image of the composure he wished he'd had. His first instinct had been panic, then a ridiculous thought about his own demise via disgruntled shelving, *then* the more reasonable thought, which he vocalized, about having been bitten. And while that had been the most reserved of his initial reactions, it still erred towards ridiculousness.

“A lot?” he asked, hissing as she removed a particularly large splinter from his skin.

“They’ve been registering as orange on my runes, though,” she said. “I wonder if the runes take into account the perceived threat due to blood status...” she trailed off, a thoughtful expression crossing her

face as she healed him.

She didn't drop his hand once she'd finished. She laced her fingers between his, taking a quick glance around the cellar, as if she expected to find an audience, admonishment for a display of affection when she was meant to work. When she looked back up at him, he saw her eyes dart to his mouth, broadcasting her thoughts.

"You aren't thinking of kissing me, are you, Ministry Representative Granger? You know you're on duty right now." He grinned at her: easy and lazy and simple, how it should be.

She frowned, eyes narrowing as she lifted an index finger and jammed it in the center of his chest.

"Don't you dare pretend like you have *any* interest in me maintaining professional boundaries."

He reached up to grab her offending finger, halting her ruthless attack on his sternum.

"I'm sure I don't know what you mean, Hermione. I'm very invested in your professional boundaries." He released both her hands, stepping back.

She made a small, annoyed sound.

"So, if I were to request that you kiss me until I can't breathe or have me on one of these casks you'd decline out of respect for my professional responsibilities?"

He felt his focus contracting, as if everything else in the room had dropped away: leaving her and that beautiful sentence and nothing more. Fuck his banter. Now he had an image in his head of her bent over a wine rack, and if she was offering—

"Show me to the nearest safe surface," he said.

She laughed, stepping forward to give him a light, wholly unsatisfactory kiss. When he tried to pull her closer, she wriggled out of reach, still smiling.

"I'm not saying it isn't tempting," she said. "But you were right. I'm working."

Well, that had backfired spectacularly. It wasn't so much that he

actually expected her to shirk all her responsibilities and let him shag her senseless in a mostly decommissioned wine cellar, but having so recently been reintroduced to a version of his life where he could touch her again, he opted to take any chance he got.

He massaged his recently healed palm, not even a twinge of pain beneath the skin. She'd vanished his blood, too. He'd barely even noticed.

"Thanks for saving me, Granger," he said just as she'd turned to tackle more work.

She tilted her face, features mostly in profile as she acknowledged him, a smile pulling at her lips. "You're welcome," she said. "I'm sure you'll find a way to repay me later."

Playful Hermione, *almost* irreverent to the rules Hermione: she'd discovered how to tease him, and he loved every minute of it.

—

Draco loved sex in the high heat of summer. If he already had to suffer and sweat under the several layers of robes and cloaks that magical fashion required—and that cooling charms never could quite chill in the right way—he figured he might as well make the most of every opportunity to disrobe.

Hermione liked to banter when the heat got to her. It was as if the temperature literally boiled something in her blood, turning her irritation into a sharp tongue that had her sniping at his every move, every word, every thought. It riled him up in the best kind of way.

Kissing her stalled that sharp tongue, robbing her of retorts he'd only paid half-attention to anyway, distracted by how freshly fucked she looked with humidity inflating her hair and glistening on her skin.

Cooling charms could only do so much in the throes of a heatwave. But taking one's clothes off? Well, that always did the trick. If Draco's flat had to feel like a heating charm gone awry, even with the large windows thrown open for the sake of a cross breeze, he would at least enjoy his ability to cast a privacy charm and divest his *girlfriend*—confirmed, discussed, decided between the two of them—of her

clothes.

He might not love being hot, but he loved making Hermione sweat. Making her squirm. Making her flush red and pant for breath as she struggled to form coherent words with that brilliant fucking brain that never stopped.

He dragged a knuckle down her spine, dropping a kiss on her shoulder blade as she whimpered from the contact. He rocked his hips forward, driving into her from behind, and appreciating every nuance of the shudder it wrested from her. She made a louder sound, something half-breathed, half-moaned, against the velvet cushion.

Draco wanted to see her face. For as lovely as fucking her over the arm of an antique sofa was, she'd buried her head against the green seat cushions and beneath her mass of hair. He not only wanted to hear the pretty sounds she made, but he wanted to watch their origins in strangled expressions that danced across her face.

He slipped into a lazy, easy pace: one meant for sweltering days and meandering, delicious sex. He leaned forward again, breath releasing as a groan from the new angle. He brushed her hair to one side, exposing the beautiful line of her throat. He sampled her skin there, tasting the salt on her neck, the heat radiating off of it. She arched against him, a halting, broken moan wrenched from her lungs.

"Quiet, love," he said into her skin, winding an arm around her ribs to pull her into a standing position. "The windows are open."

She let him move her, pliant clay beneath his touch: warm and moldable on a hot day.

"You cast a privacy charm," she said, sentence ending on a whimper as he withdrew from her completely, stepping back just enough to turn her towards him. He smirked, memorizing the tide of her flush as it rose and fell on her chest and cheeks.

"Did I?" he asked before capturing her lips in a kiss, desperate to taste her. She canted against him, and he could feel her stretching on her tiptoes, trying to bring their hips as close together as possible. She made a desperate, whining noise when he rolled a nipple between his thumb and forefinger, dipping his head to follow the action with his tongue.

"We're long past foreplay, Draco—*please*."

Her hands skimmed the surface of his chest, descending, before she gripped his hips, pulling him closer. She kissed his chest, hot, open-mouth kisses tempered by a soft, delicate brush of tongue. She kissed once at the center of his chest, then again directly over his heart. He wondered if she could feel it, the way his pulse sputtered and stuttered, starting and stopping entirely at the behest of her lips and tongue, hostage to her in every way.

He wound her curls around his fist, gently angling her head away, stemming her assault on his heart. She pulled at his hips again, a desperate plea in the action as she looked up at him. She bit her lip and begged again, hitching one of her legs around his.

"Please."

How could he possibly deny *that*?

He pressed her against the arm of the sofa again, lifting her to sit on it, angled towards the wall. She'd need support. He'd had his fill of languid strokes and slow sex; he intended to earn this swelter.

He brought his lips down on hers, one hand trailing along her collarbone, soft touches as the spaces between them shrank, slick skin coming together to generate even more warmth. He groaned against her mouth as he sank into her: the best kind of heat. She swallowed his sound, greedily kissing and clinging to him with arms wound around his neck, nails dragging through his hair.

Every thrust, every kiss, every shiver, every moan. They were his. Draco did this to her. He drove coherency from her brain and watched her fall apart beneath him: a writhing tangle of limbs and curls and pants pleading for *more, yes, Draco*. These were the moments when he felt like she might keep him, might let him stay in her schedule, planned into her life over months and years, not just days and weeks. Or maybe she'd give him even more time to please, and fuck, and love her, unbound from a single day in her busy week.

He buried his face in her neck, sucking at her skin, committing her taste to memory. He could feel her teetering on the edge, all quivers and flutters and broken attempts at speaking his name.

Two syllables were all it took. He measured the depth of her pleasure in the number of shattered seconds between *dra* and *co* as she tried and failed to speak through the sweet torture he delivered via friction, and fire, and sheer willpower to please her.

His concentration slipped. His words, his thoughts, his dreams, all spiraling into a single set of sensations, monopolizing his focus: the sound of her breathy whimpers against his ear, the smell of her vanilla shampoo wafting from her curls, the taste of salt on her skin beneath his lips, the feeling of her cunt enveloping him with each thrust, and the sight of stars, bursting in and out of existence behind his closed lids, a personal constellation.

He held her steady, both arms bracketing her, keeping her angled against the wall as she perched precariously on the edge of the sofa. His arms burned, ached from ensuring she stayed where he wanted her.

She fastened her legs around his hips, heels digging into his backside. He hissed as her nails dragged down his neck and shoulders—too hard, harder than she intended, probably—but he'd savor the red lines they left behind. She could mark him as much as she liked. He already belonged to her.

Her head fell back, exposing more skin for him to explore. Her curls tumbled over his forearm as she rested against it, lost to the world. The first grip of her orgasm stole his breath: uneven, broken gasps of air against her neck as she spasmed and writhed beneath him, a magnificent example in undoing.

The privacy charm had been a good call: between the pitch of her whimpered moans as she came apart, and the staccato of his grunt as he found his own release, they'd made little effort to hold back.

He heaved several labored breaths against her chest, echoes of an orgasm buzzing beneath his skin. Hermione barely moved, barely breathed, body taut beneath him. Still inside her, Draco pulled her against his chest with his remaining, unsteady strength and straightened to his full height.

He brought one hand beneath her thigh, offering both support and warning before he lifted her off the sofa's arm.

"Hold on, love," he breathed in her ear. Despite his considerable build and her compact frame, he'd been thoroughly spent. The two steps and a pivot it took to walk them around the arm of the sofa nearly did him in.

They melted into the cushions in a tangle of sweat and limbs and heavy breathing.

Gods it was hot.

She practically burned him with her skin, with hot air against his neck as she burrowed against him. But gods, was it worth it. Even as he could barely think, world still struggling to coalesce, he could imagine no finer use of his time than holding this woman in his lap and trailing his fingers up and down her spine.

He dropped a kiss to the top of her head. A wild curl assaulted him, tickling his cheek. She squirmed, her mouth finding his neck, then his jaw, before beginning a sated exploration of his lips. Draco closed his eyes, savoring the impossibility of having her after the uncertain stretch of time when he thought he'd lost her.

She ran a finger from the base of his throat, down his sternum, and let out a quiet, happy laugh.

"We need a shower," she said, voice quiet against his lips. "We—made a mess."

He hummed a chuckle in agreement, letting his hands knead her arse.

The Floo flared to life across from them. Draco pulled her closer, instinctively wrapping both arms around her in a feeble attempt to shield them.

Theo's voice followed the flash of green.

"Draco, you would not believe the progress—oh. *Oh no*. No—gods."

A series of several unfavorable things happened over the course of the next five seconds.

First, it took one solid, horrified blink—wherein Draco, completely naked, post-coitus, with his girlfriend in his lap, made direct eye contact with his lifelong friend—for Theo to whirl back around, frantically grabbing for the pot of Floo powder.

Next, Hermione squealed, jumping away from him. Perhaps she had intended to hide, but she only ended up exposing even more of both of them. Thankfully, Theo already had his back to them, mitigating the potential amplification of everyone's embarrassment and discomfort.

Last, Draco groaned, failing to summon his wand, distracted and incapable of the requisite focus. Hermione found a throw blanket and

haphazardly and belatedly preserved her modesty.

Scant seconds had passed but it felt like a lifetime's worth of humiliation.

The Floo pot shattered.

Theo twisted to reach for it, still frantically muttering to himself, a bright red flush crawling up the back of his neck. He grabbed a handful of powder from the floor, leaving the shattered pieces of the pot behind, and threw it into the fireplace, spinning away with his eyes screwed shut.

Draco wasn't sure he'd breathed during the entire, agonizing five-second event.

He glanced over at Hermione, wrapped in an atrocious crocheted monstrosity that Molly Weasley had given her, blushing redder than he'd ever seen her. She hovered near the corner of the sofa, one large step from disappearing into the hallway.

"Thank you for not abandoning me," Draco said with a smirk. He couldn't drum up the self-consciousness to be embarrassed about nakedness, still planted on the sofa. He'd already spent every drop of mortification on Theo's interruption.

"I thought you were kidding about not putting up privacy charms," she said, lifting the back of one hand to her cheeks, testing the heat of her blush. "I was—a bit loud at the end there."

Draco's smirk turned to a full-on grin, pride swelling at that statement.

"I did spell the windows. I just"—he waved his hand at the fireplace—"forgot to lock the Floo."

"How could you forget—"

"I was clearly more focused on getting in your knickers."

Hermione sent him an exasperated look before she cast a cleansing charm and retrieved Draco's wand from the table, tossing it to him.

"I suppose Theo has learned a valuable lesson about inviting himself over unannounced." She handed him his shirt and trousers as well, still wrapped in the blanket.

"Unlikely. It's a horrible habit, been doing it for years."

“This wouldn’t have happened at my flat. My friends don’t barge in uninvited.”

Draco snorted. “I’d have to actually go to your flat for that to be the case.”

“You can. You’re more than welcome to, whenever you’d like. It’s just—small. Your bed is literally twice the size of mine.”

Draco leaned into his smirk, lazy and satisfied. “Not that we made it there.”

She drew her lips together, shielding the smile that might have been his reward. With a sigh she said, “It sounded like Theo had news. Why don’t you pop over and see what he needed, and I’ll get cleaned up?”

He didn’t immediately respond, eyes lingering on the way she had the blanket clutched around her chest, slipping off her shoulder: criminally distracting.

“I’ll just throw some clothes on,” he finally said. “I suppose I was hoping to get cleaned up *with* you.”

If not for the fact that Theo was likely experiencing a mortification-related crisis on the other side of the Floo, Draco would have locked the Floo grate and never left.

—

“What the fuck, Draco?”

Theo had a tumbler in his hand, filled to at least four finger’s worth of liquor as he lounged in a dramatic leather wingback. Draco shook his head.

“No,” Draco said. Theo didn’t get outrage. Draco did. “What the fuck, *Theo*?”

“That poor sofa.”

“My poor girlfriend.”

“My eyes.”

“My cock.”

“Couldn’t see it, Hermione was in the way.”

“Were you *looking*, Theo?”

“No, I was not. But there was a moment of staring I wish I could take back. It’s burned in my retinas. Do you think Hermione would be willing to obliviate me?”

“No, and don’t ask her to.”

Theo blinked at the sudden steel in Draco’s tone.

“I should apologize to her,” he said, tilting back his drink and gulping at least three shots worth of liquor.

Draco lifted a brow.

Theo set his glass down with a thud, sucking in a strangled breath through his grimace. “That was not the good stuff,” he said. “I really wasn’t planning on being drunk tonight.”

“It’s barely half two in the afternoon.”

“I’ll need a sobering potion. You have one at your flat? I can apologize to Granger while I’m there.” Theo stood suddenly and then paused, as if assessing whether or not that alcohol had taken effect.

Draco held up a hand, stopping him.

“Wait a full sixty seconds before coming through. I’ll make sure Hermione has dressed.”

Theo threw his hands up, pushing out an exasperated sigh. “Is there a *question* that she might not be?”

“We were spending the day together.”

“That doesn’t explain nearly as much as you think it does.” A pause. A frown. A groan. “Actually, it explains too much.”

“Sixty seconds,” Draco said again. He pulled out his grandfather’s pocket watch, made note of the second hand, and grabbed a fistful of Floo powder, returning to his flat.

When he stepped through, he called to Hermione in warning,

apprising her of Theo's imminent arrival, or, as it were, return.

She walked into the room just as Theo stepped through the Floo. Draco's pocket watch had only counted forty-five seconds. Theo clearly had a death wish.

Draco's inquiry into whether Theo had actually used a clock or just counted in his head—as if that were a precise unit of measurement—stalled in his throat as Hermione stepped into his field of view, piling her curls into a messy bun atop her head.

He needed to get Theo out of his flat.

Hermione wore a pair of his boxers and his Slytherin Quidditch jersey. Green looked good on her. And he desperately wanted her to turn around so he could see his name written across her back. She looked indecent, more alluring than if she'd been standing there stark naked.

"What are you wearing?" Draco managed to ask, throat dry, already half hard in his trousers.

She smiled, lifting her shoulder in a small shrug. "Isn't this what girlfriends do? Wear their boyfriend's clothes?"

He heard her attempt at sounding casual, confident, like her statement was nothing but a face-value series of words strung together. But he saw the uncertainty lingering beneath, the hint of a question. He would have kissed every ounce of it away if Theo wasn't standing right next to him, freshly traumatized.

"This is not better," Theo said, pulling Draco from his dangerous thoughts about his gorgeous fucking girlfriend. "In fact, this might be worse."

Hermione seemed to have remembered her recent embarrassment, expression torn between anger and humiliation. "Have you perhaps learned something valuable today, Theo?" she asked him, putting her hands to her hips.

Draco smirked; he rather enjoyed seeing that posturing directed at someone else.

"Yes. I'll never be touching that sofa again."

She frowned, narrowing her eyes at him.

"I thought you were planning on apologizing?" Draco asked, abandoning his lingering stance by the fireplace. He walked to Hermione and dropped a kiss at her temple before continuing to the green velvet sofa, sitting and crossing an ankle over his knee as he watched Theo's wary reaction.

Theo cleared his throat. "Right. Apologies, Granger. If we could all agree this never happened, that would be excellent."

Hermione didn't give, hands still planted on her hips, eyes narrowed at Theo. She pressed her lips together, and Draco watched as she tried and failed to suppress the smile that ultimately broke free.

"Fine. You're forgiven." She let her arms drop as she moved to sit next to Draco.

Theo looked incapable of processing his level of his disgust at seeing them sitting on the sofa together, which felt like appropriate punishment to Draco, all things considered. He stretched his arm around Hermione's shoulder as she curled against him.

"You came over for a reason, Theo?"

"Blaise is my best friend now, so you know. Indefinitely, I think."

Draco rolled his eyes. "That's what you came to say?"

"No, no. That's a very recent development after"—a pained expression crossed his face as he gestured vaguely at them—"all this."

"And why were you here in the first place?"

Theo rocked on his feet, looking suddenly like a lecturer presenting to his rapt audience.

"The door. Behind the painting. To the vault."

A pause, several breaths, as Draco waited for him to elaborate.

"I got it open," Theo said. "I got the door open."

"And?" Draco asked, leaning forward in genuine curiosity.

"There's a hallway. Can't see around the corner and it's warded—extensively."

"How extensively?" Hermione asked.

“Melt-your-skin-off, extensively.”

Draco heard Hermione make a humming noise of acknowledgment. Both she and Theo seemed disturbingly unaffected by the idea of skin-melting defensive wards. They bonded over some of the strangest things.

“Do you think that’s it, though?” Draco asked.

Theo considered. “There could be another door after the hallway that I can’t see. But I think I’m close. These new wards have family magic in them, old blood magic, like the kind for the estate’s primary wards”—he grimaced—“unpleasant, but familiar enough. I think—maybe a couple of months?” He smiled, bouncing on the balls of his feet.

“Congratulations,” Hermione said. Draco realized she had a hand resting on his thigh. He found it very, very distracting.

Theo swayed a bit, still grinning at his accomplishment.

“Can I have that sobering potion now?” he asked. “The whisky’s starting to hit me and I need to get out of here before you two start”—a gagging noise, a vague gesture, a general sense of trauma—“again.”

—

With Theo sobered and departed, Draco leaned his head back against the sofa and let out a long exhale. Sure, he was excited about the progress Theo had made. He’d been trying to access that vault for five years now, but the timing had been terribly inconvenient, and the emotional whiplash sufficiently jarring.

Hermione stood by the fireplace, wand in hand. She arched a brow at him. Then, silently, she locked the Floo.

“Shower,” she said. “Now.”

With orders like that, he’d be willing to let Hermione boss him around any time she liked.

He kissed her halfway down the corridor. As much as he loved seeing her in his Quidditch jersey, he pulled it off, desperate to taste her skin

again, trailing lips and tongue across her chest.

She divested him of his own clothes as they crossed the threshold to the bathroom, a frantic, stumbling mess of limbs and fabric and rapidly rising temperatures.

She took him in her mouth as the shower nearly scalded him, hot and steaming. But that heat held nothing in comparison to seeing Hermione on her knees, beautiful and soaking wet, lips on his cock. The water was hot; his temperature rose, her mouth seared, his entire body aflame, feverish. She was burning him up, burning him alive.

He realized he'd let her. He'd let her ruin him, melt him down and remake him if that's what it took.

He had to brace himself against the tiled walls, a surprising coolness against his forearm as he leaned against it. He wound his other hand through Hermione's hair, fisting it as she mesmerized him with the sight of his cock disappearing inside her mouth. If this was ruin, he welcomed it. Pleasure and heat and her beautiful face.

Chapter End Notes

[icepower55](#), [Endless_musings](#), and [persephone_stone](#) are superstars. seriously. and they all do writing of their own that you should be reading!

and with this chapter, we have surpassed w&h in total word count. it's madness. thank you all so SO much for continuing to read this story and share this experience with me! i feel endless guilt for not having the time to reply to comments, but please know that i read every single one and they bring me SUCH joy and motivation! y'all are truly the best!

Chapter 21: -1.416, -1.500, -1.583

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

September

tick tock

The eighth room in the guest hall tried to kill him. Not so much in the way that several of the rooms had quite *literally* tried to kill him. But more in the sense that his heart might collapse in on itself, the first stage of a supernova, before exploding outward in an eruptive display of his cosmic quantities of stress. It was the second to last room left to tackle, and it had belonged to Bellatrix Lestrange during the war. Draco's skin crawled just looking at the door, imagining the things inside.

And Hermione—in all her stubborn, symbolic, ruthless wisdom—made it abundantly clear from the moment he told her who the room belonged to that it was *hers* to handle, and hers alone. Draco had been relegated, with confident reassurances and a kiss for good measure, to practicing his Patronus as he waited with horrifying anticipation, for something to go wrong.

Dark and ominous and filled to the brim with red runes and haunting memories, Bellatrix's room stole every happy memory Draco might have used to cast a Patronus. But Hermione insisted he practice, that she could—and should—do her job without him. That didn't stop the paranoia, or the creeping edge of unease that inched its way over cursed carpets and expensive tiles.

He hated trying to find a way to conjure a Patronus while watching as Hermione tackled Bellatrix's room and all its looming threats.

"It won't work if you let yourself get so agitated," Hermione said, placing a hand on his forearm after he, yet again, failed to cast the charm. He hadn't so much as managed a feeble mote of light in nearly a month, worry derailing him. For her part, Hermione seemed too calm, too eerily unaffected by working, day in and day out, in a room steeped in so much dark magic that it nearly choked the breath right out of him.

"I'm not agitated. I'm fine." He shrugged away from her touch and immediately missed the contact. He'd been allowed in the room as she worked, a compromise to calm nerves that simply could not handle having her out of his sight. Not here.

She considered him for a moment, curiosity crawling across her face, before she came to a decision. She stepped closer, slipping her arms around his midsection and forcing him to face her in a loose hug. He let his wand arm drop, resting it atop her shoulder with a sigh.

"Draco. It's clearly not fine."

Normally, she knew when to push and when not to. In this instance, he wished she hadn't. But she offered him closeness and affection in the middle of the workday, which meant that her concern stemmed from something deeper than mere curiosity. He'd acted out of sorts enough for her to abandon her sensible working morals in favor of his needs.

He held her closer.

"I just wish you were done with this room so I can lock it and have Theo come over and ward it. I don't like you working in here."

She stiffened in his arms.

"This is my job and I'm fully capable of handling it."

"I know. That doesn't mean I like it. Everything about Aunt Bella gets under my skin. I want to be done with her. And I don't want you to get hurt in the process."

Her grip around his torso tipped towards painful as she squeezed, briefly, before letting her arms drop. She stepped back, out of his reach, watching him with her brows drawn together, lips pursed.

Her head swiveled, taking in the dark, mostly empty room around them as if for the first time.

"I didn't let her win, remember? It's just a room."

He grimaced. "Then shouldn't I be allowed to help?"

"I expected it to be worse, honestly," she said with a shrug, not answering his question. He wondered if she thought avoiding the flaws in her logic could vanish them from existence, *evanesco* for her

inconsistencies. Although, he supposed if ever there was a point where one's logic should break down, the border of madness Bellatrix so skillfully straddled would be it.

"Did she spend much time here?" Hermione asked, another direction, another diversion, another deflection.

"I don't think so."

She crossed her arms, pivoting in a slow circle. Unlike many of the other rooms in the guest hall, and quite contrary to Draco's expectations, this one had been in relatively good condition when Hermione began, apart from the swath of red warning runes. The furniture bore no signs of recent *reductos* and subsequent reconfigurations. The wood paneled walls had no scorch marks that scarred so many of the other rooms. Even the window dressings remained intact, although they did have an inclination towards suffocation that Draco found both unpleasant and alarming when Hermione encountered them for the first time.

When she turned to face him again, she tilted her head, annoyance melting from her features.

"I have my sleeves pushed up today," she said.

And she did; her cream colored jumper must have overheated her, and she'd shoved the sleeves above her elbows. His gaze flickered to her left forearm.

"I can have my sleeves pushed up, and it doesn't bother either of us," she continued. She took in the room again. "It's rather nice to be able to do it in here, in a way."

She brought her hands to her mouth. For a terrifying moment, heart jumping to the back of Draco's throat, he thought she might be crying. But the sound that escaped from behind her hand was more of a giggle, shoulders shaking as she tried to hold it in.

"Are you—" he tried to start, not knowing if he meant to end that statement with *okay*, *losing it*, or something else entirely.

"I think you've corrupted me," she said through a laugh, finally dropping her hand and allowing herself the amusement.

Draco's entire body tensed, a flare of hot fear slingshotting from his chest to his throat. *He'd what?*

“No—I’m sorry, don’t look so shocked. I only meant—” she said, breaking off as she wrangled her giggles, shaking her head as if to shake off her unwanted mood. “I was just trying to think of a way for this room to be less awful, and the first thing that popped into my head was that we should have sex in her bed.”

Draco had never been so stunned in his life.

Had she learned how to cast a wandless, wordless *stupefy*? He didn’t know if he could move his limbs, engage his breathing, pick his jaw up off the floor.

She bit her lip, barely stifling another giggle.

“I know. It’s so silly and immature. It was just the first thing I thought of. Probably because that’s a lot of what I think of—you. You’ve really invaded my thoughts, you know. But”—a pause, a mournful glance at Draco, then the bed—“we can’t. I am working, after all.”

Draco dragged himself out of his shock, disturbingly aroused in such a vile place. He pulled out his pocket watch.

“The workday is nearly done,” he said, lifting a brow at her.

She shook her head, smiling. He didn’t miss the flicker of indecision as it sparked to life, burned bright, and then fizzled on her features. “You’re very attractive. And very convincing. But realistically, I don’t think there’s a cleansing charm strong enough to convince me to touch her bed.”

She pulled up her runes, easily transitioning back to her work, as if the air between them hadn’t just nearly ignited from the sudden sexual tension. Though he couldn’t disagree with her; as poetic as the *fuck you* to aunt Bella might have been, Draco didn’t much enjoy the idea of touching her bed, either.

Sighing, he thought of Sarajevo and tried to cast a Patronus, failing each and every time.

—

“Are you *really* not going to tell me what we’re doing?” Hermione

asked as she stepped into his flat on the evening of her birthday. Conveniently, Hermione's birthday fell on a Friday this year, which meant Draco had the opportunity to plan a full evening, assume an overnight stay, and then enjoy an entire Saturday in her company.

She brushed a few shimmering cinders mixed with Floo powder from her dress: a pretty purple thing that Draco had never seen before. She absently twisted a sleek curl around her finger before tucking it behind her ear. Briefly, she patted at the back of her head to assess the twisted updo she'd forced most of her normally wild hair into.

"Is that a new dress?" he asked in lieu of actually answering her question. He stepped forward and kissed her cheek, lingering when her hands found his waist, her breath catching. He felt her skin warm beneath his lips.

She nodded as he shifted, dropping closer to her ear. "You look beautiful," he said, savoring the way her fingers tightened their grip on his shirt before he stepped back. "But no, I won't be telling you."

She pouted, an edge of wariness peeking through. "I don't love surprises," she said, words slow, cautious.

"You already know we're going to dinner. Can a man not at least keep the destination a mystery? I can guarantee there will be no huge surprises, nothing grand or extensive, per your request. And I can absolutely guarantee there will be *no* jewelry involved."

She laughed in a surprised burst, eyes widening as she lifted a hand to her lips, face blushing prettily at her slip.

Draco smiled, reaching for her hand, absently drawing patterns against her skin with his thumb. "You might recall, it didn't go very well last time." He kissed her before her embarrassment had a chance to grow. She sighed against him. That simple act, that acceptance, that giving in, ignited a warm and comforting glow inside his chest.

"I suppose it didn't," she said as they broke apart, yet lingered close.

Draco could have laughed, his turn to appreciate understatement. Instead, he found himself idly playing with her fingers.

"I *will* give you more jewelry one day," he said, releasing her hand. He kissed her cheekbone. "*Expensive* jewelry." He wound his hand in her hair. "*Heirloom* jewelry." He kissed the corner of her mouth. "*Meaningful* jewelry." He let his fingers dance down the line of her

spine. “But tonight,” he paused, listening for the sound of her breathing, which he was fairly certain had ceased altogether in the anticipation he cultivated, “the only thing you get from me is a lovely dinner.”

She released a breath in a small whoosh. His own lungs contracted, heart hammering behind his ribs.

“If I didn’t know better, Draco Malfoy, I might think you’re trying to make me fall in love with you.” Her words were quiet, eyes locked to his as they hovered close together, in an orbit that could end in a kiss or oblivion, perhaps a combination of both.

“You’re a clever witch,” he said. “I’m sure you already know that’s exactly what I’m doing.”

—

The zucchini blossoms weren’t as offensive this time around. In fact, they were rather lovely, delicious and reminiscent of his absurd experience the last time he’d been to this restaurant with her. He couldn’t help but find amusement in it.

Hermione sipped her wine, smiling at him as the candlelight flickered and danced across her skin.

“I didn’t have you pegged as the sentimental sort,” she said between bites of their appetizer. “But it’s rather nice.”

Draco scoffed. “I am *not* sentimental.”

Hermione tilted her head, watching him with a faint, calculating smile playing at her lips. He saw several thoughts, several questions, wind their way through her features before she finally settled on one. He savored that anticipation, waiting for her to choose her words, knowing she’d challenge him in some way, or surprise him with something thoughtful or extraordinary.

“Why did you choose this restaurant, then?”

A simple question. An easy answer. “It felt appropriate. And—I value appreciating the pleasant moments in my life, few and far between as

they may be.”

“That is...nearly a textbook definition of sentimental,” she said, distracting him from what might have been a rebuttal by running her foot along his calf beneath the table. That certainly hadn’t been an activity on the menu the last time they were here. Then, quieter: “When we ate here, that was a pleasant moment for you?”

“Excluding the part where you’d been injured, yes.”

She hummed in agreement. “The injury wasn’t ideal.”

“But it was”—he drummed his fingers on the table, a split-second of indecision over his words—“almost like a date. Accidental, of course.”

Her foot, which had been gliding up and down his leg, froze. She blinked, a smirk twitching into her expression, and then resumed her movements, reaching for her wine again.

“I wondered,” she said after a sip. “There were moments—that evening. Sitting here. With you. It felt like it might be something of a date in a strange way.”

Draco slid his hand across the embroidered tablecloth, seeking hers. Had they not been sequestered in a tiny, dim corner booth, such a public display of affection might have made him uneasy. But in what felt like relative privacy, he pulled her hand to the center of the table, where he gripped it, leaning forward.

He dropped a kiss to each of her fingertips, enjoying the way her gaze darkened, eyes fixated on his every movement as she spoke again.

“But you were betrothed then, so I knew it wasn’t really.”

He hummed against her knuckle, thumb tracing the tendons up the back of her hand.

“And now I’m not.”

“Now you’re not.”

He brought her hand back down to the tabletop, still absently tracing her skin, addicted to the comfort of contact.

“You won’t be again, will you?” she asked, fingers twisting and flexing within his.

Draco let out a small laugh. “It took Lucius nearly a year to negotiate that contract.”

“It’s been nearly a year since you broke it.”

“That’s not what I meant,” he said, squeezing her hand when he felt her pulling away from him. “He won’t. He wouldn’t—Hermione, it’s your birthday. Let me make this a lovely night for you. Don’t worry about things that won’t happen.”

She nodded, but he saw a flicker of concern stashed out of sight, dashing in and out of his periphery. She worried—about many things, he knew—and this, now among them. He tried to corral the concern in a different direction, send it elsewhere, lull it to sleep for the evening.

Draco tried to lure it away with expensive wine and rich entrees; he tried to coax it into submission with casual, affectionate touches and dessert so sweet he could taste it on her tongue when they kissed, stealthily and silently, while waiting for their bill.

And when he still sensed that tiny flicker of unease winding through her thoughts, her evening, he resolved to banish it through sheer devotion, determined that if he could not wine and dine her worries away, he could show her with his hands and his mouth: a lovely counterbalance between her head and his heart.

The purple dress had been lovely, but it looked best on his bedroom floor. For as much work as he assumed she put into taming her curls into a smooth, elegant updo for her birthday, Draco much preferred the sight of her hair fanning out around her head, wild and untamed. He preferred to lose himself in those curls, tangling his hands in them as she threw her head back against his pillows, mouth dropped open, cries of pleasure falling from her throat.

Draco loved her brain, he really did. He loved being surprised by it, impressed by it, turned on by it. But there was an extra bolt of love and lust he got from seeing it shut down completely: the woman beneath him reduced to whimpering rapid, broken chants that alternated his name with affirmations of her desire.

In these blinking moments where she stopped thinking and merely existed, she surrendered so much of herself. He knew, even if she hadn’t said it yet, that his devotion was not one-sided. He knew that this overwhelming thing he’d decided to call love, this thing that scraped and clawed at the inside of his chest, this thing that fought so

hard for proximity to her, did so because it knew her as well as it knew itself.

It took an embarrassing amount of self-control for Draco to pull himself from bed the next morning. His incentives to remain between the sheets were high, what with a naked, beautifully disheveled Hermione Granger sleeping there. But he'd foregone dinner with his parents the evening before and to miss breakfast the next day would raise several questions he had no interest in answering.

He felt reasonably confident Hermione wouldn't even note his absence. Considering how late they'd stayed awake—a mess of lips and limbs, thoroughly exhausted—the note he'd left beside her pillow felt superfluous.

He allowed himself one grossly self-indulgent look at her before he left, chest cavity tight, constricting. Blue-tinted early morning light trickled through his bedroom curtains, gently illuminating the sleeping woman wrapped in his sheets. There was something so light, something so bright, something so distinctly *not dark* about it, that as Draco slipped out of his bedroom he couldn't quite shake the dream-like sensation, the unreality of his life.

The manor had a habit of returning him, forcibly and unkindly, to reality.

His mother fussed over the efficacy of his ironing charms, dissatisfied with the single crease along the shoulder that he'd missed. He pointedly did not mention that he'd hastily pulled this particular oxford from where it lay draped across a settee, forgotten, where Hermione undressed him the night before.

His father pushed for more details surrounding Draco's investment account, a line of questioning ever increasing in frequency as his numbers continued to stall, and worse, dwindle. Not even Blaise's interference, helpful as it had been, could turn his holding's downward trajectory around quickly enough to escape Lucius's notice.

Over a soft-boiled egg, Draco offered the most bland, perfunctory responses he could muster, lacking both the motivation and skill to

dissect the complicated interplay between supply, demand, international trade markets, and exchange rates, especially at barely half eight in the morning.

Further, he simply did not care. And for the first time, he got the sense that Lucius realized it, too, a sneer pulling at his lips as he reached for his copy of the *Daily Prophet* and abandoned their obligatory morning conversation.

Narcissa smiled at Draco over her tea, the kind of empty, sad smile he interpreted as her wish to understand why her breakfasts had taken a turn towards unpleasantness over these last several months.

But she didn't really want to know; Draco knew she didn't. The answer likely still lay sound asleep, naked and thoroughly fucked, in his bed.

Which brought him to the question Hermione had planted inside his brain. When he took her worry, banished it with hot kisses against her neck and thrusts so deep that his vision spun with each drag and pull, he'd simply siphoned it into his own mind instead. He'd sucked the poison from her blood, but taken in too much himself, new concerns burning his bloodstream.

Draco sliced a melon on his plate, careful to ensure his silver made neither scrape nor scratch against the china. He speared the fruit, dread gathering in his stomach. He noticed his mother's eyes following him, and he knew he had to ask.

"Father," he began, proud he did not flinch when Lucius flipped his paper down to look at him. He wondered when he had last voluntarily initiated a conversation with his father over a meal. Their breakfasts and dinners had been so quiet, so stunted, so choked by rampant omission that he'd nearly forgotten what his own initiative looked like, a perpendicular angle jutting away from his avoidance.

Lucius inhaled through his nose, nostrils flaring: the only indication that Draco had been heard at all.

"I was wondering if you were currently engaged in or"—a fumble with his words, confidence melting under Lucius's stare—"were intending on engaging in any further marriage contract negotiations on my behalf."

Forgetting he already had a piece of melon on his fork, Draco stabbed another onto it, taking a reluctant bite, chewing, swallowing, and then

setting his jaw, all in the time it took for Lucius to decide whether or not he would answer.

“They have been unsuccessful thus far,” he finally said.

Something in Draco’s chest dropped to his stomach, cold anxiety winding and curling, latching onto every nerve it could find.

“Why do you ask, darling?” Narcissa asked from across the table, a curious, almost-hopeful lilt to her words.

He hadn’t thought this far ahead, hadn’t entirely considered the consequences of broaching such a fraught subject so openly. He’d mostly noted the line between Hermione’s brows, the hint of possession in her tone, and sought to do anything, everything to eliminate her worry.

He cleared his throat.

“I would prefer”—he tried not to cringe—“if you did not.” The words felt wrong, off, too formal or maybe not formal enough. “Please,” he tried again. “Don’t.”

“Don’t what?” Lucius asked, paper crinkling in his hands where he’d started to form a fist. “Don’t provide for the future of this family? That is my role, Draco. And this is yours.”

Draco couldn’t look at him. Perhaps foolishly, he pleaded to his mother’s sensibilities instead.

“It wasn’t just that it was Astoria,” he said, realizing too late that if anyone would have sympathy for the implosion of his betrothal to Astoria, Narcissa Malfoy would not be that person. She’d had to survive the initial impact damage, after all. “It was more...all of it,” he finished lamely. Neither of them would understand.

“Is there a girl?” Lucius asked suddenly, rough and demanding.

Draco didn’t hesitate to consider his response.

“No.” It was the easiest lie he’d ever told his father. Not out of shame, or guilt, or regret, or all of the many other reasons he might have tried—and mostly failed—to deceive Lucius in the past, but purely out of respect for her privacy, out of a need to protect her from his family’s judgement, from their wrath. “If there ever is one, though, I wouldn’t want to worry.”

Lucius sneered again, letting out a heavy breath.

“There is a girl,” Lucius said, as if that might be the most offensive thing he could imagine over breakfast. “You’re transparent, and you’ve been quiet, and your clothes are creased. Are you keeping her in that secret flat of yours?”

Draco placed all of his effort in not letting his fork wobble out of fury and fear as he brought another bite of melon to his mouth, forcing some measure of control into his posture. He glanced at the large grandfather clock on the opposite side of the room: nearly nine, an acceptable concluding time for breakfast.

He set his fork down, sliding his chair away from the table.

“Please do not engage in any further contract negotiations on my behalf,” he said, attention focused on the ornate silver egg cup just in front of his mother’s right hand. He watched as she flexed her fingers around her own fork. He couldn’t bring himself to look her in the eye.

He nodded to no one in particular and excused himself, a quick pace down the manor halls and through the Floo, back to his flat where peace took precedence over decorum, over duty.

He’d said there was no girl. The easiest, boldest lie of his life. His lie greeted him as he stepped back into his bedroom, still curled beneath his covers, a book propped open in her hands, and a wide smile offered freely upon his return. Of course there was a girl. A woman. The girl. *The* woman.

And he couldn’t imagine how there could ever be any other.

Chapter End Notes

my darlings [icepower55](#), [Endless_musings](#), and [persephone_stone](#) have provided endless, unbelievable amounts of support in beta'ing this very, very long monstrosity! and for that, i am eternally grateful! <3

thank you everyone so very much for reading! can y'all believe we're getting close to the end of ANOTHER year? and i'm less than four chapters away from finishing my draft of the entire thing, too! it's mind boggling! i'm so thrilled that folks are still enjoying this story and i appreciate so much each and every one of you who takes the time to leave kudos or a comment or drop in on tumblr or discord to say hello. seriously, the greatest people,

you are! <3 thank you, thank you, thank you!

Chapter 22: -1.333, -1.416, -1.500

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

October

tick tock

The last room in the guest hall, an enormous luxury suite that occupied the majority of the upper level, hadn't seen the light of day since the war. Draco had vague memories of his mother trying to force the room open in the weeks following their sentences, when it was just the two of them under house arrest, wondering how Lucius was faring in Azkaban.

Narcissa had wanted everything cleaned—immaculate—redecorated, redesigned, and renovated from panelled ceiling to tiled floor. Everything, that is, except for two rooms: the drawing room, which she paid to have locked and warded and conveniently erased from her memory, and this one, which she could not enter no matter how hard she tried. She wrote the entire guest hall off as a loss, furious that neither she nor her elves could find a way in.

Hermione Granger could, though, in her own Ministry-mandated version of cleaning house that, under any other context, Draco might have imagined his mother grateful for. After all, Hermione was only doing exactly what Narcissa had done immediately after the war, just with much finer detail and a lower tolerance for cursed objects and poisoned wines.

Hermione heaved a sigh when the door to the suite finally clicked open. Draco had only been paying partial attention, making half-hearted attempts at conjuring a Patronus as he fully expected the door to flummox her for months. Instead, it took her days. And a substantial amount of sweat. And the occasional angry cursing, which Draco found both hilarious and arousing coming from her mouth.

She turned to Draco, door swinging open behind her, a satisfied but somewhat reluctant smile on her face. "I almost thought I'd have to get Theo a consultant permit to help on this one."

“He would have loved that. Never let you forget it.”

“Hence my resistance.”

“So stubborn.”

She smirked.

“It wasn’t easy,” she said, glancing over her shoulder at the dark, cavernous room behind her.

“It was *his* room, after all. I don’t expect anything about it will be easy.”

Draco tried to ignore the twisting and grinding sensations warring their way through his intestines, his bones. If he had a choice, Hermione would never step foot in this corridor again, would never even so much as look at this room that once housed The Dark Lord.

But he had no choice. Not only was this her job, but this was Hermione Granger. She didn’t need to be saved. She did the saving. Even from the ominous room in front of them.

“It’s the middle of the afternoon,” she said, turning away from him and peering through the doorway. An obvious, errant observation that seemed so innocuous at first that Draco nearly let it slip by him, hurtling down the hallway and into oblivion.

But Hermione did not often speak without purpose. He caught her words first, then her meaning.

“It’s very dark in there.” If Draco focused hard enough, he could almost see the darkness moving, like tendrils of black smoke curling in the air, winding their way about the space.

“Suspiciously so,” she said in agreement.

She cast her diagnostics at the threshold to the room, still standing in the corridor: a level of caution Draco both appreciated and approved of. He wondered if she did it for him. His chest preemptively ached with worry.

She stepped back, into him, at the force of red runes that erupted from her spell. He’d seen her runes look complicated before—a myriad of symbols both familiar and unfamiliar, some rooms entirely in the red when she began—but he’d never seen them overload in such a way,

symbols flashing and expanding, fighting for attention or notice.

With her back against his chest, Draco braced her, preventing her from falling over entirely in her surprise.

“Well,” she started, relaxing into him a bit. The small action soothed some of the uncomfortable anticipation in his chest. “I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised by that. But still. That is—that is a lot of red.”

Anxiety swirled in an uncomfortable eddy in Draco’s stomach, collecting in a blackened rectangular frame, a door through which Draco had no desire to pass. He kept Hermione held against him for calming, seeking a sense of stability in the face of something so unknown and imposing. His hands, which had curled around her upper arms, wandered, brushing her hair off her neck, tracing a line from her elbow to her fingertips. He leaned down and kissed the bit of skin he’d just exposed.

“Good thing you have me to help,” he said, trying to sound flippant and unconcerned. But he desperately needed her to know that he wouldn’t be able to sit on the sidelines for this one. He’d let her have Bella’s room. He couldn’t let her have this one, too, both for her safety and his peace of mind.

She leaned further into him.

“You do make an excellent assistant.”

“Assistant? I’m your supervisor.” He wound a hand around her hip, pulling her against him for good measure, or emphasis, or simply to feel her arse against him. All were valid reasons.

“You are *not* my supervisor,” she said, and he assumed she meant for her emphasis to sound authoritative.

It sounded breathy, beautiful, and entirely at odds with the looming threat in front of them. But Draco could hardly bring himself to care. What was a dark, cursed room when he had a brilliant, pliant woman pressed to his chest, near-vibrating with the kind of energy that with the right sort of encouragement, would have her grinding against him?

“Are you sure you don’t work for me? I spend a lot of time watching you, ensuring you do your job correctly.”

“Ignoring the problematic nature of power dynamics at play if I were

to be sleeping so enthusiastically with my supervisor, at best, you are my coworker.”

He chuckled against her ear, both hands now on her hips, mouth trailing hot breath and tiny, fleeting kisses against the side of her throat. He didn't care that they stood in the middle of a hallway, he didn't care that she had work to do, or that angry red runes drowned the bright mid-afternoon light in a ruddy glow.

“Coworker? I don't care for that terminology. I'd say we're more of a team.”

She hummed, whether in acknowledgment of his words or the path his fingers had just taken, dipping under the hem of her blouse, he didn't know, hardly cared.

“I suppose we have made a fairly efficient team,” she said. She gripped his thigh with one of her hands, fingers bunching his trousers, releasing them, dragging along his muscle.

“More than efficient,” he said, fingers exploring the peaks and valleys between each of her ribs. He explored her skin with a rough touch, something primal seizing control of his limbs. “We work well together. Good balance”—he traced a line beneath her bra—“great chemistry.”

He heard her swallow, the back of her head thrown against the soft flesh beneath his shoulder.

“We do work well together.”

“And there's so much more to do,” he said, voice dropping to a whisper as he slipped his fingers beneath the cup of her bra.

Her wand clattered as it bounced against the tile floor, rolling away.

She made a noise she might have intended to sound questioning, but that came out distressingly close to a moan instead.

“There's the north wing,” he said. “The guest house, my parents' wing, the cellars, and the attics. You've been busy”—he palmed her entire breast with one hand, pulling her arse against him with the other. He shamelessly drove his erection against her lower back, and she shuddered under his touch—“but this manor is very, very large.”

Her breath caught on the inhale, but she swallowed, forcing steady words. “I'm not bored yet.”

“Neither am I.”

“I rather think we’re just getting started,” she said, breathing heavy.

“I agree.”

“Good, that’s good.”

Draco rolled her nipple between his fingers, bra shoved up beneath her blouse as he sucked at the taut tendons on her neck: nipping and laving and worshipping her skin with hot breath and an eager tongue.

“Draco?” she asked as one of her hands lifted, reaching blindly for his neck, fingers grappling for purchase at the nape.

“Hmm?” he hummed against her neck.

“I think I’d like to have sex while the Ministry is paying me to work. And then I’d like for you to never mention it again.”

He tightened: his grip on her hips, on her breast, his latch on her neck, the feeling in his chest, all of it.

“That may be my favorite sentence you’ve ever spoken.” He hiked up her skirt, determined to drown out the glow of red runes with the sounds of her coming, panting his name.

—

It took the entire month. Honestly, the brevity of such a timeline impressed Draco. Walking into The Dark Lord’s former chambers had felt like stepping back in time. The unnatural darkness curled around him; a soft, sensual greeting that tasted like smoke and felt like memory. Everything about the space felt putrid, rotting, vile, but they could see none of it; darkness acted as the room’s first and primary line of defense.

Hermione worked carefully, more so than he expected, given his personal witness of her habits over the last several months they’d spent in this hall.

They worked in near-complete darkness for days. Their diagnostic runes served as the only source of light, pointing out that yes, this

chair had lingering dark magic soaking through its upholstery, straight to the wooden frame. And yes, these curtains were cursed to strangle if given the right opportunity and target. And yes, these books have been banned for centuries and have several layers of complicated blood magic keeping them sealed and dangerous. And yes, literally every object, every step, every gulp of air in the room carried with it a level of hatred, of history, and of harm lying in wait.

“Do you feel like the dark is trying to say something to you?” Draco asked one day, putting words to the uneasy, prickling feeling at the back of his neck.

“Say something? No. Do something? Yes. I keep expecting it to attack me, if I’m honest.”

“It feels like it’s trying to whisper to me, like it’s trying to get in. Like smoke blown against my face, and I’m holding my breath.”

“This is an unpleasant room.”

“To be expected.”

Her hand found his.

“I’m being cautious,” she said, and he knew she meant to reassure him.

“I’m being bold—though it feels more foolish than brave. I know a Gryffindor who insists those are similar sensations.”

“They are.” He didn’t need to see her face to know she smiled. He felt it in the way her hand pulsed against his, an increase in pressure that acknowledged him.

“It’s straightforward though,” she said. “This room. We work well together, we have a system. It’s been weeks already and neither of us has been hurt.”

He pulsed his hand against hers in turn.

It took them until the very end of the month. It took two blood curses, one of which required another trip to St. Mungo’s, a suffocation jinx, a terrifying moment where Draco thought Hermione’s eyes might burst from their sockets, and a waking terror not unlike a boggart that left Draco collapsed on the floor, screaming, as Hermione kneeled next to him, pinning his shoulders such that he didn’t thrash too violently.

Every fiber, every stretch of sinew, every tendon, every muscle, every ligament in Draco's being begged him to demand that they abandon the room altogether.

He held that instinct in the bottom of his lungs, a breath he refused to exhale. He followed Hermione's direction instead.

And finally, nearing six in the evening on Friday, the 31st of October, Hermione used her Patronus to drive out the last remaining black tendrils from the room's darkest corners, forcing light into the darkness, turning the nightmare into a dream.

—

"Just come on through with me to mine so I can change, and then we'll head to Harry's together."

Draco barely heard her, still high off the success of finally ridding The Dark Lord's former room of all its evil, hateful magic. Seeing that room flooded with purple light—happy, satisfied runes floating around them—had burned from his brain every drop of anxiety he had over attending a Hallowe'en party at Harry Potter's house.

His step paused just shy of the Floo when her words caught up with him, a knock at his eardrums announcing their irregularity.

"Yours? As in your flat?"

Hermione rolled her eyes, but gave him an exasperated sort of smile all the same.

"I haven't been keeping it from you—"

"—But you've never actually had me over—"

"—I've told you you could come over whenever you like, but yours is so much more convenient—"

"—I'm only teasing—"

"—I know." She sighed. They both smiled, lost in pointless not-banter. Her mysterious flat had become something of a joke, a bruise with no pain that they poked and prodded at when they felt like needling with

no hurt. “It’s just”—she swayed a bit from side to side, as if physically weighing her words on her shoulders—“it is a very small flat and yours is very— *not* small.”

He smirked. “Would you believe me if I said I’ll withhold judgement?”

She laughed, head thrown back as the sound burst out of her. Draco poked at her side, pulling her into the Floo as he tossed the green powder down.

He’d been about to tell her that it wasn’t that funny, not enough to warrant such a throaty, involuntary sounding laugh. But then the spinning stopped and he realized she had not been exaggerating.

She turned to him, crossing her arms, foot tapping as she arched a brow.

“It’s—certainly not as large as mine.”

She shook her head with a snort as if she’d expected nothing less, but she drew her lip between her teeth as she dropped her arms.

“Relocating and healing my parents was expensive, even with help from the Ministry. And, well—I wouldn’t let them pay me a ridiculous salary just because I’m...” She shrugged, dropping the end of her sentence.

“Their most brilliant employee, no doubt? Can’t imagine why they’d want to pay you an obscene amount of money.”

“You’re biased.”

“Incredibly.”

She shook her head, curls bouncing as she did. She didn’t hide her smile.

“I’ll be right back. I just want to change into something more comfortable and we’ll go.”

Draco almost followed her, just for the pleasure of watching her change, of seeing her bedroom, and perhaps testing his luck on how late she’d be willing to arrive at Potter’s little get together. But she’d already disappeared into a room and closed the door behind her by the time he realized how much he favored the idea of being as late as possible. He imagined there would likely be a heavy Weasley

contingent in attendance; he did not relish the idea of spending an evening with an indeterminable number of Gryffindors.

He examined her space as he waited: a tiny living room with the fireplace, walls predictably lined with shelves, crammed to bursting with books, a small, adjacent kitchen that looked relatively unused, and a tiny kitchenette table shoved in the corner.

His gaze caught on her planner, left open on the table, each day crammed with a huge checklist of to-do items, including their upcoming gathering at Potter's. He paused, laugh catching in his throat as he took in some of the other—more scandalous—details of her life that she included in her schedule.

He meant to tease her, but she'd reentered the room with an orange monster in her arms.

"Ah, the other man in your life," he said. "I suppose this had to happen eventually. Did he take it poorly?"

Hermione nuzzled into the creature's fur, impressively ignoring its yowl of protest.

"This is Crookshanks," she said, returning the animal to the ground. It did a few lazy, appraising circles in the space between them, yellow eyes fixed on Draco.

"Hermione, someone lied to you. You told me you had a cat. That is an experimental transfiguration project gone wrong."

She huffed, reaching for a jar on her kitchen counter. She tossed Draco something that he caught out of reflex. He recoiled at the texture: almost-damp, spongy, a bit grainy.

"Be nice. He's half kneazle. Not unlike *Hippogriffs*; he'll know if you're being nasty. Try offering him a treat."

"Bringing up that Hippogriff is a low blow, Granger. I thought you were a highly moral Gryffindor."

She just grinned at him, a pointed look of amusement crossing her face. Draco didn't know exactly what she expected, but her wide, hopeful eyes told him she had certain expectations for a specific outcome in this introduction.

He sighed, crouched, and held out the treat: an offering to the beast.

Crookshanks surveyed him with round, assessing eyes, sniffed the air, swished his tail, turned, and trotted into Hermione's bedroom without a second glance. This left Draco crouching awkwardly, arm outstretched, a smelly cat treat in his hand, disturbingly embarrassed over having been shunned by a cat.

He looked up at the sound of Hermione's stifled giggle.

"I honestly didn't expect anything different," she said through her fingertips, pressed over her mouth and chin.

Draco vanished the treat and stood.

"Oh no, you don't get to laugh at me because your questionably feline roommate doesn't like me."

"He must know you're the one who keeps me away from home so often," she mused, eyes sparkling in her enjoyment of the situation.

"I saw your schedule." He pointed to her planner on the table, countering her with his own amusement. "I don't think I ever actually believed you included sex in your to-do lists."

She sucked in a sharp breath but didn't drop her gaze.

"Would you rather I not ensure I have time for you?"

Draco laughed. He saw her digging in, determined not to balk. He loved it.

"Do you plan on scheduling our entire sex life?" he asked, a bit of a poke at her armor.

She crossed her arms, rooted to her spot. "Well, it's not always written in advance, you know. You're very—we can be spontaneous. Sometimes I pencil it in after. I like to account for my time."

Draco let his gaze wander to the open page for that very week.

"I seem to be taking up quite a bit of it these days."

"You are."

"You have a little something written in for this evening," he said, grin breaking across his face.

Finally, she flushed, crossing the space between them and snatching

up her notebook. Draco caught her wrist, a light touch to halt her retreat.

“Were you planning on seducing me tonight, Hermione?”

He couldn’t suppress the self-satisfied smile, or the heat winding its way through his chest, reaching for her.

“It crossed my mind.”

His eyes flicked to her planner.

“I don’t know if I’m available, you see. I may need to consult my schedule.”

She narrowed her eyes and shrugged, stepping out of his orbit. He lamented the loss as soon as it happened.

“We’ll see,” she said. And they knew, the both of them, that he’d abide by any plans she had for him, any time.

“I look forward to it.”

—

“Weaslette, you’re looking ghoulish. I was under the impression this wasn’t to be a costume party,” Draco said in greeting, offering a bottle of firewhisky as their contribution to the evening’s festivities.

“Then why have you come as a vampire, Malfoy? Do you miss the sunlight?”

Hermione’s hand tightened around his forearm, something shocked, something warning.

He held Ginny’s gaze long enough for each of them to arch a brow at the other, not exactly smirking, but close. Potter interrupted with a drink in each of his hands—a little stumble, eyes a little glassy—shoving them at Draco and Hermione.

Draco hesitated as Hermione took her drink.

“Am I to presume there’s no threat of poisoning?” he asked, only

partially kidding. While Draco didn't necessarily believe the inscrutable Harry Potter would engage in something as nefarious and plebeian as a run-of-the mill poisoning, he suspected there were several Weasleys currently present who wouldn't mind it so much if Draco dropped dead.

Potter rolled his eyes, an exaggerated motion, and stole Draco's drink back. He took a sip from it, lifting his brows and smiling in a far-too-satisfied display of proof, and dropped the drink back in Draco's hands.

"I think I prefer poison to drinking after you, Potter."

Potter merely wrapped his arms around his wife's midsection from behind, nuzzling into her neck. Draco, for a horrified moment, hoped he never looked quite so absurd when he did similar things to Hermione. At least he never did it in public—did he?

"Getting a little drunk before Malfoy got here was an excellent idea," Potter whispered too loudly into Weaslette's ear. Hermione snorted, quickly taking a drink to hide the noise. "He's funny when I'm buzzed."

Potter barely seemed to register his wife's laughter. Draco certainly noticed Hermione's giggles, shoulders shaking just enough to give her away as she hid her mouth behind her drink. Draco locked his jaw, feeling the muscles along his neck tensing as he tried to work through an annoyance that felt disturbingly like reluctant amusement.

He abandoned niceties; he had no desire to mingle with however many other Gryffindors were in attendance. He walked to the chair he so often occupied when avoiding gatherings at Potter's house and sat, downing his drink in several determined gulps.

Hermione followed, just long enough to comb her fingers through his hair, a smirk ghosting across her face. "I'll get you another," she said, before disappearing into the next room.

Draco made eye contact with a floating jack-o-lantern, bracing himself for an evening with Hermione's friends.

Once Draco had a few drinks in his system—alcohol buzzing through his veins, warming his blood and fogging his brain—Potter wasn't all that bad.

Hermione, the beautiful, lovely, horrible traitor that she was, abandoned him at some point during the evening in favor of Ginny. She felt so distant, all the way across the room, cheeks rosy and smile wide as she chatted and laughed with several of her friends. Draco had been content to nurse his own drinks in his de facto chair of avoidance when Longbottom decided to join him, followed shortly by Potter, who flopped onto the nearby sofa.

Potter's extended story about a case of his involving a Goblin—a garbled, rambling mess of a tale obscured by poor storytelling skills and a fair bit of drinking—nearly lulled Draco to sleep. But the reminiscing Potter and Longbottom started doing once Potter's tale found its inevitable conclusion where he solved the case and saved the day? Those stories interested him.

"A full body bind? In first year?"

Longbottom grimaced, taking a sip of his drink. Potter just laughed. "Ask her," he said. "She won't deny it."

Draco tapped the side of his glass with his index finger, considering. The words *fuck it* found their way to the forefront of his brain, a kind of loosening of inhibitions and an inability to ignore the subtle challenge.

"Granger," he said, raising his voice so that it carried across the room, zipping and winding its way around the floating jack-o-lanterns, the transfigured bats, and the carefully smoking cauldrons. Hermione tilted, her whole body leaning so that she could see around Lavender Brown. "Did you put this one"—he nodded towards Longbottom—"in a full body bind when you were twelve?"

She didn't answer at first, and he wondered if his words had difficulty traveling the space between them, forcing their way through other people's conversations and the irritating background noise of The Weird Sisters blasting from the corner of the room.

Then she smiled. That same slow, mischievous smile she'd had when she told him about riding a dragon out of Gringotts. It was a knowing smile, a guiltless one. Just like it had the first time he saw it, that simple curve of her lips ignited a heat inside him.

“Yep,” she said. Draco could hear the pop of the ‘p’ from all the way across the room. She winked at him—bloody *winked* at him—and then leaned back over, once again obscured from view, rejoining whatever conversation was happening around her.

Draco looked back at Potter and Longbottom, both of whom wore varying expressions of disgust and discomfort.

“Brilliant and ruthless, that woman,” Draco concluded, taking a drink in acknowledgement, or perhaps celebration.

Potter shuddered.

“Don’t feel bad, Longbottom. She slapped me in third year,” Draco said.

“Sent a flock of conjured birds after Ron once,” Potter added.

Draco chuckled. “I assume he deserved it.”

“About as much as you deserved the slap.”

Potter smirked. Draco did, too. Longbottom laid his head back against the sofa, barely holding onto the empty glass in his hands.

Potter’s smirk dropped into something more serious.

“She is brilliant and ruthless. She’s also my best friend,” he said, words a little wobbly around the edges. “She likes you.”

The room blurred a bit when Draco rolled his eyes.

“Careful Potter, wouldn’t want you to say anything you’d regret when you’re sober.”

“She likes you a lot.”

“I’ve gathered as much,” Draco said. And all he could think about—all his idiotic, single-minded brain could provide him with in that moment—was how much she liked him when he had her in his arms or in his bed. Vibrant images of her flushed face flooded his brain.

“She really likes you a lot.”

“As ever, your eloquence astounds, Potter. Is this where you warn me not to hurt her like some bumbling oaf defending a woman’s honor? I’ll tell you now, I’m more afraid of her than I am of you.”

Potter's face shifted again, back to a smirk. He pushed up his glasses, askew for the last several minutes. "Good. That's good."

"Good," Draco repeated, not really knowing why.

He and Potter didn't talk much after that, mostly drinking in silence or engaging the occasional interloper who dropped in for a chat.

But Draco found he didn't resent him so much, either.

—

When Hermione slid into his lap, some time past midnight and after several guests had already left for the evening, Draco felt a little bit like he could finally breathe.

He hadn't sequestered himself in his favorite out-of-the-way armchair for the entirety of the evening, tempting as the thought was. He'd done a lap with Longbottom, refilling their drinks and managing stilted conversation about what rare potions ingredients were growing in the Hogwarts greenhouses. He'd chatted with one of the older Weasleys—involuntarily, and he didn't bother to remember his name—while trying to see if he could sneak Hermione away from Luna Lovegood's never-ending oration about her travels abroad. Most of it sounded made up, from what Draco could gather. He even had a surprisingly robust conversation with the Weaslette about Quidditch, wherein they managed to agree that her brother (the worst one, Ron) had no taste with regard to his love of the Chudley Cannons.

Draco returned to his chair, or what had become his chair by frequent occupancy rights, as the party wound down, with more and more attendees slipping out through the Floo or disappearing from the back gardens with a *pop*.

"I'm sorry I abandoned you for so long," Hermione said, breathing hot, alcohol-laden breath against his neck. Her fingers wandered his chest in a playful exploration. A tipsy Hermione was a handsy Hermione, and Draco had zero objections.

"We're going to need a code," he said, voice just as low, just as suggestive, as he dropped a kiss to her neck. "I've been dying to get my hands on you all night, and you had no idea."

“Oh, I had an idea,” she said, leaning back to look at him with a wide smile and an obvious glance at his mouth.

Draco grinned, tugging her closer as he splayed his hands wide along her back.

“Is it time for my seduction?” he asked, mouth hovering close to hers, tasting the faintest hint of cinnamon on her breath. So close.

A disgruntled sound drew Draco’s attention away from the beautiful woman in his lap who he very, very much wanted to kiss.

“I’m *right here*. Just—gross,” Potter said, already standing from the sofa.

“Leave then,” Draco said with a bite that came from several drinks and a subtly gyrating witch in his lap. Gods, she was killing him.

“It’s my house,” Potter said, flipping him two fingers but already well on his way out of the room.

“Go find your wife if you’re jealous,” Draco called after him, breath gusting out of him as Hermione moved her hips again, bearing down against his. The tips of his fingers dug into her hips and the flesh at her backside.

“This is definitely your seduction,” she said, dropping several open-mouthed kisses to his throat. “Also, it’s a thank you,” she said between swipes of her tongue against his skin.

He held her hips steady as he rocked his, seeking friction.

A thank you. He assumed, for spending time with her friends. For that not-exactly-combative exchange of words she’d caught him having with Weasley as he’d passed along a beer. For staying *well* past her initial estimate that the party would clear out by midnight. For being a part of her life, integrated with the others, an imposter behind enemy lines.

For some reason, that, of all things, stripped him raw, pulled at the ragged edges of his lingering guilt, of the conversations with his parents, about his parents, that he couldn’t quite get out of his head.

He’d given her half a relationship. He’d put up such a fight to have one with her, and he’d only given her a facade. She’d given him her friends and family; she’d told everyone in her life that he was in it,

and that it was their responsibility to accept that fact. He'd only given her himself, which sometimes felt like it was all he had to give, but it also felt too much like passive participation for his liking.

"What if it was really real?" he asked. He could feel the firewhiskey burning his breath and his brain and his caution. He asked the question to her throat, too much of a coward to ask it to her face.

"What do you—really real?" She'd stilled the rocking she'd been doing in his lap, but her hands and fingers still wandered trails through his hair, along his neck, across his shoulders.

"That's what you said. It wasn't—couldn't be *real*. What if it was?"

Her hands stopped, slipping like dead weights over the front of his shoulders, landing in her lap. He finally sat back, sat up, looking at her through the slight spin in his vision and the warm blur cast by floating, meandering candles.

"What if I tell them? And we'll go on dates in Wizarding London," he traced a line of freckles across her cheekbone before threading his fingers through her curls, cradling her head. "We'll just *be*."

She leaned into his palm, releasing a wistful sort of breath. That moment felt encased, enveloped, enclosed in time and space as their own bubble of existence outside the normal passage of time, independent of the forces that pulled it forward. It was just the two of them, sitting together on an armchair meant for one, when the time wasn't quite morning and wasn't quite night, alone and together and strategizing a future with brains soaked in alcohol.

For the stretch of several blinks, before reality forced her to answer, it was a perfect moment: a moment he could never, would never, want to change, even if he could, when he could.

"Do you think they'd—your parents—be accepting of that? Now?" she asked after several wonderful eternities passed.

"They've—" He struggled to find the words, to explain his hope that was mostly, inconveniently, unfounded. "They've been more open to my independence in the last couple of years."

"And if they aren't accepting of this?"

Draco wanted not to have a reaction to that. He wanted not to fear that possibility. But he did. A fear solution mixed with liquor seeping

from his brain.

“I don’t know,” he said. Because he didn’t. But he wished he did.

And that wasn’t the right answer. He could tell from the tiny twitch in her brow, the small downturn at the corner of her mouth. Expressions so loud in a silent room he wondered if everyone in the house had heard them, if everyone knew of his misstep.

Hermione coerced her disappointment into logic, a skill so impressive he sometimes marveled at the things she could do with a single thought.

“Well—don’t do anything irrevocable. Not until you know.”

It was a warning and an offering and enough for now.

He kissed her with the intent to convince her that he did know, even when he didn’t.

Chapter End Notes

thank you so much for reading! i hope you're still enjoying this story, long as it's getting! and we're not even halfway there yet...but close! i so appreciate every comment, every kudos, every tumblr ask, every discord message. seriously, y'all are so kind and give me so much inspiration and motivation as i'm cranking out the last few chapters of the draft (i only have 3 left to write!!).

<3 <3

As always, much love to [icepower55](#), [Endless_musings](#), and [persephone_stone](#) for helping me whip my drafted words into prettier verions of themselves.

Chapter 23: -1.250, -1.333, -1.416

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

November

tick tock

Draco decided to do a foolish thing over dinner. Foolish: brave by some definitions, idiotic by his own. He hadn't planned it, which was worse. It simply burst out after festering and spreading beneath his skin for so long. One sideways glance from his father irritated a wound Draco had tried to avoid. Not even the hearty leek soup his mother raved so disingenuously about in an attempt to control pleasantries could distract him from scratching at the scab.

"I'm not interested in a betrothal," he said, blood rushing to his ears.

His mother finished her spoon of soup, setting it down gently against the china.

Draco shook his head—to himself, at himself—and dared to forge onward.

"I just wanted to be clear. After the conversation we had a couple of months ago. There—is a girl. And I'm not going to drop her for the sake of a political agreement."

In Draco's periphery, he saw his father's posture stiffen, an imposing force at the head of the table. Across from Draco, his mother leaned in, cautious curiosity taking hold.

"Who is she, darling?" she asked, pointedly folding her cloth napkin and placing it atop the table, signalling the end of her meal.

Draco's jaw flexed. His mother pressed.

"We do have a legacy to uphold. Any fine lady would understand that. I'm sure whoever she is, she has a legacy of her own to consider."

Draco laughed, bursting from a place of irony. Hermione's legacy

would be bigger and better than any of theirs; it already was.

“If only you knew,” he said, risking a casual glance at his father. “I’m not going to tell you who she is so you can try to pay her off, or whatever plan you already have in mind.” Draco didn’t know if he meant to address his mother or his father with those words, or perhaps both in some strange tandem. For all their faults, they worked well as a unit, reacted to problems in similar, efficient ways.

“Evidently I was not clear, Draco.”

His heart dropped at his father’s words. Calm and cold, they cut straight through him with a brutal efficiency that said *I made you, I know how to unmake you*. And he did. His father might not *know* so much about Draco anymore, but he knew the parts that mattered, the parts he’d helped build.

Draco clenched a fist beneath the table, spine stiff as he made eye contact with his mother.

“You do not have a choice here,” Lucius continued. “If the Greengrasses had not terminated our contract, you would still be marrying that girl, regardless of the mess you’d made. Your duties to this household are not optional.”

Draco used to enjoy mealtimes with his family, a family routine of breakfasts and dinners that bound them together: twice a day, every day.

That was all he could think as his father laid out, with excruciating clarity, just what was expected of Draco. He used to look forward to dinners with his parents, when he could tell them about his day, perhaps boast about a new trick he’d executed on a broom. His mother would ask him questions, dote on him. Lucius would imply pride, or pride-adjacency if Draco had the right news to share, perhaps his potions scores. And his parents would talk to each other, about more than their house arrests, more than their distaste for the Ministry. More than the state of a world that had left them behind.

He missed that the most: seeing his father with some measure of kindness, of fondness in his expression, even if it wasn’t directed at Draco. But he didn’t even have that anymore. If his parents still showed affection to each other, it happened behind closed doors, perhaps in their wing of the Manor where Draco no longer visited. He could hardly remember a time now when he didn’t look at his father and feel a chill, finding only coldness, never warmth.

He didn't know how to respond.

Perhaps no response was the worst response. Disappointment flashed across Lucius's face when Draco finally dared to look at him. His lip curled: a sneer

"I am sorry to have disappointed you, Father."

The words were stiff; they tasted like parchment. They dried him out, choked his throat, sounded as insincere as they felt.

"Should you wish to excuse yourself for your duties to this household, then you may also excuse yourself from this family and all of the protections and privilege that come with—"

"Lucius!"

Narcissa turned abruptly in her seat, sharp enough that the feet of her chair scraped against the tile floors. The sound echoed with a shriek nearly as loud as her voice.

His father barely blinked, either immune or disinterested in Narcissa's ire. For his part, Draco couldn't seem to tear his eyes from his father. The thing neither of them had been willing to say for over a year, now: laid bare between them, served on their dinner table with the aplomb of a rotted meal.

"What your father means, Draco, is that there is value in family lines. In producing heirs to carry on the right kind of legacy. You are our only son. Our only legacy."

His mother's words did nothing to cover the stench of an ultimatum that lay in decay on their antique dining table. Her platitudes were nothing but a pretty garnish, added to obscure or perhaps finish with a fresh taste. The meat of what had already been said still remained.

She didn't say the words *pureblood* or *mudblood*; she didn't say anything about blood at all. But Draco knew what she meant, what hid behind the word *legacy*, behind the inherent *blood* involved in an heir. She meant, by way of prettier, softer words, exactly the same thing his father did.

He wanted to say no, to reiterate his point—his demand—really. He wouldn't do it. If they tried to rope him into another marriage contract, he would not agree.

He'd said no before. But saying it again, saying it now, something stalled the word in his throat; it should have been an easy, simple syllable to speak. But this *no*, saying it here would lead to something more, something bigger, that stared at him from somewhere in the middle distance between where he and his father sat on opposite ends of a table too large for just three people.

Draco couldn't bring himself to say it. He couldn't cross that line, not yet. It was too deep, too far. His mother had been appalled with Lucius's threat. There was enough hope that, with time, perhaps, they could change. Or, at the very least, learn to accept when they couldn't.

—

"It's soon. I promise," Theo said as he retrieved his wand, having recently thrown against the wall in a fit of frustration. He had called Draco and Blaise over, insisting he was so close to cracking the last ward guarding his family vault that they were required to be present. As such, Draco had been sitting in a corridor for the last two hours, smoking a cigar and drinking scotch whilst waiting for Blaise to arrive via the last-minute international portkey they'd had to set up from Italy. All the while, Theo grouched and grumbled about how he would just start making his own international portkeys if they took this long to procure.

Draco could imagine several worse ways to spend his afternoon—and it had been a while since he'd had the pleasure of watching Theo try to break through wards while shouting about his paranoid ancestors—but he could also think of several better ways, and each of those involved Hermione.

However, as the traditional workday had only just reached a natural end, she was likely still fiddling around in the Manor's north wing, decommissioning safe, easy, simple rooms and objects that hardly gave Draco a second's worth of concern. He could breathe so much easier, so much lighter, knowing they'd finished that guest hall and never had to set foot there again.

Theo vanished back into the tiny passageway revealed by the door and the painting he'd already broken through. Draco wanted to believe, after five years of work, that Theo might finally get into his

family's most secret, most precious vault. But there had been false alarms in the past, always another door to open, another ward to crack. Five years or fifty, and it still wouldn't scratch the number of generations that went into building those security measures.

Theo was good, brilliant even, but some things—

“Draco!” A shout followed by a flushed, panting Theo racing back into the hall. “It's open. I did it. It's—I can walk right in. The last door doesn't have anything on it.”

Theo looked torn between screaming and crying, eyes wide as he breathed heavily, in and out and in and out.

“And fucking Blaise still isn't here,” he said, bending over and bracing himself on his knees.

Draco stood, dropping the cigar in his tumbler. He walked to Theo and gave him a solid thump on the shoulders, pulling Theo's attention from the labored breathing he'd been doing between his knees.

“I did it,” Theo said again, either as proof or a prayer.

Draco leaned, peering around the corner and into the narrow stone passageway.

“Well?” he asked, arching a brow at Theo. “What now?”

It felt like that moment they'd shared with a time turner, so long ago, staring a potentially reckless, stupid decision in the face and asking the question: *do we dare?*

Theo, evidently, shared a very similar thought. He shrugged.

“We fucked with time once,” he said, “how bad could my family's ancient, warded, secret vaults be?”

“You did say there were skin-melting wards.”

“Point taken. But still.”

“Still.”

Theo rose to his full height again. There had never really been a question, not really.

“Can you imagine? What kinds of Nott treasures have been kept in

there? Kept from me.” Theo turned, chest expanding as he took a bracing breath before entering the passageway. Cautiously, Draco followed.

“They’re all dead, Draco.” Theo sounded too pleased about that fact. “They can’t pretend I’m not the rightful heir to this monstrosity if they aren’t here to—” Theo broke off and glanced behind him. A lucky thing, as Draco could not breathe.

His chest had seized, and no measure of force trying to push or pull air in or out of his lungs could seem to start them again. Pressure gathered in his face first. Draco tried to claw at his throat, beat his chest, pry his jaw open, but he’d frozen: every muscle, every bone, every drop of blood.

The pressure in his face descended, spreading like flames contained in too small a space, gobbling up all his air and then raging in its absence, simply doubling and tripling in size and space as it consumed his throat, then his lungs, then the entirety of his chest.

“Shit— *shit*,” Theo said, barreling into Draco’s torso and throwing the two of them out of the passageway and back into the corridor where they tumbled to the ground: a hard landing on solid stone floors.

Oxygen flooded Draco’s lungs the moment he passed the threshold: pressure released, fire extinguished. It had been all of thirty seconds.

It had been agony.

Draco rolled, steadying himself on his hands as he heaved, sucking in air, ears popping as the pressure in his body recalibrated. For a moment, it felt like all his magic had been pulled to the surface of his skin, ready to burst, before spiraling back inward, seeking safety once more.

“Blood wards. I’d dismantled blood wards. I should have known—*fuck* —are you alright?”

Theo kneeled, clearly panicking, somewhere around Draco’s head.

Draco breathed again, pulling air all the way to the bottom of his lungs, holding it, savoring it.

“I’m fine,” he said on the exhale, words whooshing with a gust. “It was—like a body bind. But it did something to my lungs, too.”

“There were blood wards. It didn’t even occur to me—it’s spelled to Nott blood. I’d have to do, well, a lot more ward breaking to get you in, too.”

Draco sat up and pushed his back against the wall. He already felt mostly normal again, aside from the lingering pulse of his magic, unsettled from whatever curse had filled him up and stolen all the space he needed for everything else.

“Just go, Theo. You’ve been waiting five years.”

Theo leapt to his feet, as if waiting for permission to do something selfish had been the only thing tethering his concern in place.

“Okay,” he said. “Right, yes. Okay.”

He continued talking to himself, quiet reassurances as he gave Draco a final assessing look. He disappeared into the passageway again. Draco waited, ears prickling as he expected to hear whoops and hollers at any moment, exclamations of excitement and success.

Instead, silence.

It carried on longer than Draco would have liked, forcing a niggling sensation of unease. He twisted, craning around the corner to try and catch a glimpse of the promised intrigue beyond the narrow stone passage.

Then the screaming started.

Crashes.

A flash of light and a bang.

Draco scrambled to his feet, poised in a panic at a threshold he could not cross.

“Theo!” he shouted, his own voice mocking him as it echoed, fading into nothing. For all the breathing he’d lacked mere minutes before, it suddenly became all Draco could manage: quick shallow breaths as he struggled to think of something, anything to do.

Another scream: definitely Theo’s voice. Draco’s knees nearly buckled, thrown back in time.

Theo. Under his father’s own wand. A *crucio*. Theo never explained why, what it had been punishment for. Draco had only heard because

he'd Floo'd to Nott Manor unannounced, escaping a new influx of Death Eaters at his own home. When it was over, they'd Floo'd to Blaise's instead, and got drunk on Italian wines.

Draco needed to get help. He needed another curse breaker: Hermione, *fucking Potter* if he could manage it. *Anyone*.

Theo screamed again, closer to a shout, closer to Draco, too.

He needed to cast a Patronus; how else could he get help, and get help quickly?

Draco grasped for happiness, shoving away the panic, banishing the fear, trying so fucking hard to just *breathe*.

He closed his eyes, lifted his wand, and nearly fell backwards when Theo crashed into him. It took several seconds of panic tangling with relief for Draco to realize he was being hugged, unannounced.

Further, Theo's shoulders shook as he made a terrible gasping noise.

"Theo?" Draco asked, trying to get a good look at him. "Are you—are you hurt, did something happen? What—"

"It's fucking empty," Theo said through a heavy, panting breath, tearing himself away. He shot a *reducto* at the painting, achieving absolutely nothing. His eyes were wild, wide and red-rimmed, furious and panicked and pained in a way Draco hadn't seen since they were teenagers.

"It's alright, Theo. It'll be okay, at least it wasn't—"

"No"—he shot another *reducto*, followed by a *bombarda*: at the door this time—"it's not fucking alright." He spun, whirling back towards Draco. "What would you know?" The words cracked, caught in a tight throat Draco could hear, nearly feel, sympathy choking his own.

"You still have *your* family legacy. You have an account to manage that you don't even care about. If Blaise wasn't helping, you'd probably have run it into the ground already. *You* still have your history." Theo looked like he might pass out, breath coming in pants, face red as he blew out the window across the corridor, glass shattering around them.

Draco didn't move. Didn't say anything.

Theo threw his wand down the hall, where it clattered and rolled across the stones, catching on shards of glass. He gripped his short hair, dragging his hands through it with force that could very well rip it from its roots.

“Five years,” he said, quieter now, but if possible, even more furious. “Five fucking years and what do I have? I have a fucking manor and some vaults at Gringotts filled with more gold than I know what to do with. This—this was supposed to be”—he swallowed, sliding down the wall until he sat on the floor, head cradled in his hands—“this was my family’s history. Where the fuck is it? What did he do with it?”

Draco vanished the glass surrounding them and walked to Theo. With a sigh, Draco sat next to him. Theo didn’t look up, knees bent, elbows propped, head dropped in his hands. They sat for several minutes, saying nothing, doing nothing, as their respective disappointments settled around them.

“That legacy of mine? It’s not all it’s cracked up to be,” Draco said, staring dead ahead, straight through a blown out window. “I think I hate it.”

Theo expelled a breath, a noise like a choked laugh. He lifted his head, resting it against the wall, gaze straight ahead, the same as Draco’s.

“I thought you were hurt and I didn’t know how to get help,” Draco said. “Hermione has been trying to teach me to cast a Patronus.”

“Doesn’t she know that’s impossible for people like us?” The anger in Theo’s voice slipped, flat and toneless, a kind of resignation.

“She’s painfully optimistic. I clearly can’t find—or don’t have—the right kind of memory to make one. Been trying it with the moment when I realized blood purity meant nothing to me, most recently. It’s done nothing.”

“Why aren’t you thinking about Granger?”

Draco saw Theo’s head tilt towards him, more actively engaged in conversation. Draco puffed a hollow laugh from his lungs.

“She told me I shouldn’t. I can’t—and I quote—hang my happiness on her.”

Theo’s brows drew together, thoughtful.

“She might not be wrong,” he said. “At face value, I suppose. And I don’t know much about it; you don’t see *me* casting any Patronuses. But”—he knocked the toe of his shoe against Draco’s—“I imagine it would be hard to find a witch or wizard who’s not thinking of a loved one when they cast that spell. It’s based on happiness, isn’t it?”

“Your happiest memories, yes.”

Theo simply arched a brow, a fine-tuned language they’d crafted over years of silent looks and facial expressions. He could read full sentences, paragraphs worth of information in any look Theo decided to lob his way. And that look: it wasn’t just a statement, it was a demand.

Draco relented, standing.

He liked Theo’s version of that logic better. Draco liked the idea of being able to think of Hermione, especially now that she’d so fully wound her way through all his cracks and crevices, slipping little kindnesses—novelties of loving someone—in places where Draco did not know such things were possible.

He let that feeling fill him up: the hope he found in loving her, in a legacy he might not hate, that he might find pride in.

His magic swelled. He knew this feeling: warm and comforting as its tendrils spread, spiraling from his chest and towards his extremities, channeled by his wand. He focused on loving, on being loved.

It wasn’t enough, he could already feel it: a wealth of happiness but not quite enough, not yet complete.

Draco tried to relax his jaw, softening his stance, closing his eyes. He leaned into his magic. He found relief, concern for Theo, happiness that he hadn’t been hurt: a different love, that for his friends, filling up the spaces he couldn’t quite reach before. He thought of his mother, of the parts of her he knew struggled against her own expectations. He thought of the birthday toffees she bought him every year. He thought of his father, of better, different times, when he’d been gifted an heirloom pocket watch, passed from father to son, an emblem of pride. Pieces of love that didn’t have to be perfect to be happy.

And he still thought of Hermione, at the center of it all.

“Expecto Patronum.”

He gasped as he said it, a burst of unfamiliar, powerful magic exploding from his wand.

Theo laughed.

Draco kept his eyes closed.

“Oh gods. It’s perfect, mate.”

Draco cracked an eye open, carefully at first, fighting against the urge to hide from finally knowing. His whole body unwound, other eye opening. His shoulders fell, countenance caught between a laugh and a groan.

Theo did nothing to suppress his laughter, mutterings of *so fucking perfect* escaping between gasps for air.

“It’s a—” Draco stared at the silvery, glowing beast illuminating the hall around them.

“Chimaera is the word you’re looking for. You’d know if you took Care of Magical Creatures past OWLs.”

“I know what a bloody Chimaera is, Theo. It’s got—”

“A lion’s head. *Fucking Granger*. And a dragon’s tail”—another laugh—“Draco, dragon, *gods*. So fucking perfect.”

“And the goat legs? Where do those fit in?”

Theo shrugged, still snickering from his place on the ground.

“A Chimaera is a beast cobbled together from different things, seems perfect for you.” He cracked a smile, lifting his brows. “Maybe I’m the goat; I’m kind of springy. I eat a lot. Skinny legs.”

Theo’s relief, bound to his laughter, broke through the cloud of disappointment choking out the rest of the air in the corridor. “You should go show her,” Theo said with an uncanny, genuine awe in his voice. Deeper, a touch of jealousy flashed in Theo’s tone.

The silver beast took a step, eye to eye with Draco.

“Find Hermione Granger,” he told the Patronus— *his Patronus*. “Tell her I’ll be visiting her shortly.”

It gave a short roar, a grumbling sound, before it galloped through the

wall and out of sight. It didn't quite hit Draco until that moment, watching it leave.

He'd just cast a corporeal Patronus.

"Did you know Chimaera eggs are extremely illegal?" Theo asked from the floor, his whole demeanor had shifted from the broken, disappointed version he'd been just minutes before. "Maybe I should get some."

"Did I just see a Patronus? Was that a Chimaera?" Blaise asked, entering the hall and sending Theo into another fit of laughter.

—

Draco apparated to Hermione's doorstep as soon as Blaise took over managing Theo's disappointed grief: five years of work that yielded literally the worst possible outcome.

Her door swung open almost as soon as his lungs decompressed from apparation.

She stared at him, eyes wide and glassy.

He smiled, completely against his will, expression breaking across his face as he saw her.

She smiled, too.

"Do it again," she whispered, stepping aside so he could enter, lest he cast a Patronus directly on her doorstep.

He pulled out his wand.

He thought of her. He thought of family. He thought of Theo, of Blaise, of Pansy, when he had her in his life. He found the good. He didn't let the bad taint it. And he said the incantation.

"Expecto Patronum."

Hermione gasped. The Chimaera circled them, several laps as they both watched it, entirely entranced.

When it dissipated, she asked, “What did you think about?”

She didn’t shy away from the question this time, from her curiosity, like she did the last time she’d asked what he used to power his magic.

“You.” He pulled her against him, burying his face in her hair. “And my friends. My family. But mostly you. And I don’t care that you said I shouldn’t.”

Love could literally make magic; what a marvelous and unexpected thing. Sentimental, too. He’d been accused of that once.

Her hands clutched at the shirt fabric against his back; her cheek pressed to his chest. He ran a hand through her curls, trying not to lose himself in such an easy contentedness. He didn’t mind that Hermione hadn’t yet verbalized whether or not she loved him, too. He could still love enough for the both of them, even now.

He pulled away, stepping back. He found the jar of cat treats on her counter, grabbed one, and crouched in an attempt to endear himself to her monster of a pet.

He made eye contact with Crookshanks as he slinked out from behind Hermione’s sofa, drawn by the promise of a snack.

“I need you to know,” he said, still watching the cat. “How real this is for me. How really, very, truly real it is.”

He waited, practically begging the cat with a look to accept his offering, to accept him.

“Come to Christmas dinner with my parents,” Hermione said, kneeling next to him, equally fixed on the cat. “It’s real for me, too.” She placed her hand on his knee. “I regret ever saying it couldn’t be.”

Crookshanks took a step towards them. Draco’s fingers twitched around the treat, arm growing heavy. He refused to waver.

“Christmas dinner?” he asked as Crookshanks blinked his big yellow eyes.

“I want you to meet them. Things are—well, more normal. Better this year. And I think—I think they could meet my wizard boyfriend.”

Draco’s brows knitted together, barely breathing as Crookshanks took

another step closer. Hermione's hand flexed against his knee.

"Even if I fought on the wrong side of a war that affected them so much?" He had to ask the question, but he didn't want to know the answer.

"Yes," she said, after only the briefest hesitation. "And we won't—we won't tell them all that. It's—we don't talk about the war, so they don't need to know."

Crookshanks took another step, followed by three more, then took the treat from Draco's hand. He placed his head beneath Draco's palm in a barely-realized show of acceptance before he retreated to perch on the windowsill: not hiding, but not participating, either.

Hermione tilted her head, letting it rest on Draco's shoulder.

"I'll come," he said. "I already told my parents I have a girlfriend. I'll just have to tell them I plan on spending Christmas with her, too."

"They'll be okay with that?"

"No."

Draco stood, offering her his hand.

"Theo got into his family vault," he said, watching Hermione's face shift from slight melancholy to wide-eyed wonder. Her excitement dimmed as she saw his expression. "It was empty. He's—he could use his friends right now. Blaise is with him at the moment."

Hermione nodded, squeezing his forearm before she stepped into her tiny kitchen. She bent, opening a cabinet, and pulled out a bottle of wine with a ribbon tied around the neck. She held it up, looking unsure of herself.

"I got him this to celebrate whenever he got in," she said, cheeks coloring. Draco's chest tightened: such a lovely, thoughtful, beautiful witch. "Do you think he'd be upset if I brought it over? I still think it's worth celebrating. All that work. Even if there was nothing there." She shrugged, letting the bottle rest on the countertop. "He's brilliant—to be able to do that? And self-taught?"

Draco walked to her, two measly steps required to cover the scant space. One hand found her jaw, the other, her curls. He bent to kiss her, to convince her of the way he felt. Her fingers danced across his

chest, finding a home at his shoulders as he drew her in.

He let his forehead rest against hers, forcing himself to focus, lest he sink into the beguiling quicksand that kissing her could easily become.

“Would you like to come with me to Theo’s?” he asked, voice low as he twisted a curl around his knuckle, distracting himself from her mouth.

She smiled. “I can’t think of anywhere I’d rather be on a Friday night.”

Chapter End Notes

as always, i own so many thanks to my darling [icepower55](#), [Endless_musings](#), and [persephone_stone](#) who continue to slog through an absurd number of words with me despite real life commitments swallowing up their time. i appreciate them so, so much! <3

i'm probably going to finish drafting the entirety of this story today. as such, i'm feeling a bit wobbly, a little emotional. so as i return to my work on chapter 48, i certainly hope you enjoyed chapter 23! i've been so excited for draco's patronus reveal; i hope you enjoyed it as much as i did, giggling maniacally, when the idea first struck me. as always, thank you so much for your ongoing support for this story and for leaving me such lovely comments and notes regarding your thoughts. they are the best motivation and such an outstanding reward for the work i've put into writing this. i'm so very grateful! i'll see ya'll on monday!

Chapter 24: -1.166, -1.250, -1.333

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

December

tick tock

Draco spent the entirety of Christmas morning on the verge of throwing up. Breakfast sloshed uncomfortably in his stomach; conversation with his parents soured, stilted as he tried not to fidget and twist in his seat. Gift giving was a perfunctory affair, an obligation on a traditions checklist that meant very little when gifts were unnecessary. What did one give to people who could buy whatever they wanted, whenever they wanted, and truly, wanted for nothing? At least nothing that could be given as a gift; Lucius's wand did not sit under a tree, nor did Narcissa's social status, nor Draco's courage.

Draco sat quietly, nursing a single cup of tea, smiling when he was meant to smile and listening dutifully while his parents conversed as if nothing was amiss. But the day had lost its magic, leaving Draco dry and uneasy, waiting for the moment he had to tell them he wouldn't stay, having put it off until the very last possible moment.

Topsy appeared with a *crack*, announced that lunch had been prepared, and vanished again.

Narcissa rose from her chaise, smoothing the lines of her lavender robes.

"Shall we?" she asked. Lucius stood, shoulders relaxed, posture loose, more at ease than Draco had seen him in a very long time. Not even Lucius Malfoy could resist the touches of comfort offered by Christmas day. He offered Narcissa his arm, which she took, a graceful smile on her face. It was a lovely, simple, rare moment of affection that Draco had the honor to witness. And he would ruin it all in a matter of moments.

"I won't be joining you," Draco said, still sitting in his chair, delicate teacup clasped between his hands.

His mother paused mid-step, head tilting at a most minute angle as she took in his words.

“Whatever do you mean, darling?”

“I’ll be spending the rest of the day with my girlfriend and her family.”

Draco watched as his mother’s grip tightened around Lucius’s arm. His stomach sank, flipped, tore itself to shreds in an attempt to escape his body. He had to set his tea aside, damp, sweaty hands threatening his grip on the expensive heirloom china.

Something else, something stronger than his nerves, surged from Draco’s chest, a rush like wildfire tearing through him as adrenaline took hold and shook him. Not unlike when he’d dissolved his betrothal with Astoria, he felt like he might do anything, *be* anything. He might finally take charge of something for himself.

Lucius’s jaw unclenched.

“You will not insult your family by spending time on a holiday with some harlot we’ve never met.”

Anger careened down Draco’s spine. He shoved his hands in his pockets, hiding the way they shook. He took a deep breath—in through his nose, out through his mouth—and dug himself a grave, right there in the sitting room.

“Oh, you’ve met her.”

Narcissa let out a tiny gasp, arms falling to her side. Lucius’s jaw clicked shut, fury winding it together as his nostrils flared. Confusion and betrayal mingled in the air between them. Questions, too.

Draco had already said so much. He might as well say the rest. He could do it. He *would* do it. He’d told her it was real, real enough for this.

“It’s Hermione Granger. And, not that you care—though mother might care a bit, I suppose—but I love her. Very much. And I’m going to spend the day with her muggle parents, and I’m *excited* about it.”

Draco realized he should probably stand, lest he look like a child receiving a lecture.

It took several seconds for either of his parents to say or do anything. Narcissa's brows had drawn together, arms crossing in front of her body as she watched him like he'd just polyjuiced into someone entirely unfamiliar. Lucius, on the other hand, had turned red, blood rushing to the surface of his skin.

"Disarm him," Lucius said, voice tight and clipped as he spat the order at Narcissa.

"He's our son."

"He's planning to spend the day with muggles. You heard him. He's clearly lost his faculties. That girl probably has him under an Imperius. *Take his wand.*"

Of all things, Draco felt tremendous gratitude to the Ministry for having relieved Lucius of his wand for the duration of his house arrest. Draco might not have been able to defend himself if his father had decided to disarm him so suddenly. But his mother's hesitation, much as it broke Draco's heart, was enough of an opportunity to avoid prolonging this any longer.

He cast an *expelliarmus*, hating the way the spell tasted on his tongue, directed at Narcissa.

He caught his mother's wand as it flew to him. Lucius took a furious step forward before Draco switched his target, leveling his wand at his father.

"I'm sorry, Mother," he said, not taking his eyes off Lucius. "But I'm sure you prefer this anyway, not having to make that choice." He flicked his gaze to her, just long enough to see the tangle of grief and fear and anger bunching up her pretty features. "I choose to believe you wouldn't have done it," he added, knowing it wouldn't be enough.

Draco took a deep breath, lowering his wand and silently begging his father not to move. He didn't. No one did, not for an uncomfortable several seconds while they all stood in the aftermath of the things he'd said, of the things he'd done.

"I'll be leaving now," Draco said, lacking any other way to conclude what might very well be the single worst conversation he'd ever had with his parents. "I'll send a Patronus letting you know where I leave your wand, Mother. I don't—I'm sorry, I don't trust you to have it just yet."

He grimaced, seeing the hurt flash across her features. He turned and left before he could change his mind and beg for forgiveness, trying to force them to see Hermione as he did.

He could have facilitated returning his mother's wand in a variety of different ways. Topsy, for example, would have gladly performed the duty. But his Patronus was something he wanted them to see, wanted them to *know* about him. He wanted them to see the lion's head and know that it was a part of him, just as much as the dragon's tail.

He counted seconds as he counted his steps, inching closer to the Floo and feeling more and more like a terrible excuse for a son. He'd wanted to be a good son all his life. Lacking that, at least he could be a good boyfriend.

Boyfriend.

He threw the Floo powder down and, in a flash of green, realized that didn't feel like the right word for what he was, what he wanted to be.

The word *husband* crossed his mind as he spun out of sight, away from the manor that might have trapped him in another life, another time.

—

Hermione gave his hand a squeeze as they stood at her parents' front door, waiting to be let in.

"I'm dying to know what you got them," she said, smiling and serene and happy in a way that soothed him by sheer proximity.

He smirked. He'd spent the entire month searching for the right gift to give her muggle, teeth-healing, academic parents, and he'd found the perfect thing. Naturally, he refused to tell her anything about it, intent on impressing her as well.

His heart skipped as he heard a noise from inside the house, footsteps approaching. Draco's nerves felt normal this time, not like those he'd had with his own parents. These were the typical kind of nerves a man experienced when he met his girlfriend's parents for the first time. At least, he suspected as much. He didn't have much experience to use for comparison.

He turned to Hermione.

“Before we do this,” he started, regretting immediately the way her eyes widened in concern. “I just need you to know how much I love you. So much that I’m going to pretend the television in there doesn’t confuse or unnerve me a little bit.”

He brushed a curl behind her ear as she laughed, a bit manic as it burst out of her with a force not dissimilar to accidental magic, like she couldn’t have held it in if she tried.

“Gods, *oh gods*. I just—oh, I’m nervous and—can you imagine? A year ago, I could have never imagined you’d willingly to subject yourself to a television for me. A meal with my muggle parents.”

“A year?” He tilted his head as he watched her smile crinkle at the corners of her eyes. So light, so genuine.

“No,” she said, calming, voice dropping. “Longer than that.” She reached out, hand finding his jaw. “I—I love this version of you. This man you’ve become. I just—I love you.”

It wasn’t that Draco had been *waiting*.

Except that he had been. Desperately so. Hoping he might somehow convince her that he could be worth that, despite what he knew must surely be several thousand reasons to the contrary.

He kissed her without thinking. Without care for the crevasse that had opened up in his chest or the fact that they stood on her parents’ doorstep in the middle of winter. He kissed her in a way that felt like the first time. Or rather, like the first time she might actually keep him and let him keep her in exchange, like she could be his as much as he was already hers.

The door swung open, and Hermione’s father had the pleasure of witnessing Draco with his tongue in Hermione’s mouth, hand creeping towards her breast, and a not insignificant erection building in his pants.

“Hi, Dad,” Hermione said, pulling away from him. The flush of her cheeks could have been from the cold, embarrassment, or arousal. “This is Draco.”

And considering what came before, he wouldn’t have traded such a terrible introduction for anything.

Things got better before they got worse. Hermione's mother welcomed him to their home with a hostessing grace even Narcissa Malfoy would have approved of, other unbecoming details of her existence excluded. As uncomfortable as their introduction had been, Hermione's father greeted Draco with a handshake and an evaluating look, eyes narrowed and knowing.

The torture show began at dinner.

Hermione found it hilarious. Her parents seemed to think it funny, too. Draco couldn't decide if they were pulling an elaborate prank on him or if Hermione's family was simply just as fucked up as his own, and she'd failed to mention that detail.

"Drills?"

"Drills," Hermione said, not even bothering to hide her snicker.

"I'm not sure I'm understanding the definition of the word in this context." Draco set his fork aside as he shoved away a lingering, unpleasant sensation of exclusion. He didn't care for it, not knowing. But he supposed his own fish-out-of-water experience, and the humor it seemed to provide the rest of them, offered a preferred alternative to the pureblood ideologies and exclusionary belief system that would have been served at his parents' Christmas dinner.

"I'm sure I have one around here somewhere," Mr. Granger started, pushing out his chair before his wife reached out to stop him.

"Not at dinner, dear," Mrs. Granger said. The words carried with them a quiet authority that rung of Hermione's own confidence when she did something she knew how to do, simply acting for herself.

Draco smiled, finding Hermione's hand beneath the table.

"Are you familiar with machinery?" Mr. Granger asked, conversational and kind where Lucius would have sounded condescending, derisive.

"Only in theory," Draco said. "I think. I've seen films with Hermione. Those are powered by machines, yes?"

Mrs. Granger smiled, brows crinkling. Hermione squeezed his fingers before releasing his hand; he could see her teeth grazing her bottom lip from his periphery.

“That’s not—quite the same,” Mrs. Granger said. “A drill is—well, it spins very quickly and it’s used to bore a hole in one’s teeth to—”

Draco turned to look at Hermione.

“Pain potions?” he asked.

“Of a sense. Injected with a needle, usually.”

He grimaced. All of it sounded excessive and inefficient and horribly painful, despite Hermione’s insistence that it was all perfectly normal and routine. Morbid, more like it.

“Well, I feel confident you’ll enjoy my gift,” he said, trying not to think about holes in his teeth as he ate his dinner. “I believe it’s quite appropriate for your line of work.”

Unfortunately, they did not enjoy his gift.

Hermione laughed at first, then looked horrified, then laughed again. Her parents experienced an opposite reaction: horror, then tentative laughter, supplanted by horror once more. Mr. Granger called it unusual, while Mrs. Granger opted for the word unique, graciously thanking him while looking on in confusion.

Hermione—dutifully, and once her own surprise had subsided—tried to explain that the ancient human mandible he’d procured and presented them with was meant as a means of decoration, to display in one’s office. Though the extended eye contact she sent his way suggested that she needed confirmation of that fact. She concluded by informing her parents that such modestly unsettling displays weren’t uncommon in a witch or wizard’s office or laboratory. Hermione’s tone oscillated wildly between uneasy amusement and strained embarrassment.

Mrs. Granger gave up trying to school her expression partway through Hermione’s explanation, simply letting her jaw open and close with unspoken confusion. Mr. Granger poured himself a hefty glass of brandy. He offered one to Draco, which he drank quickly and indiscriminately, silently wishing it contained a Draught of the Living Dead.

With a warm trickle of alcohol-infused courage numbing his gaffe, Draco dropped a hand on Hermione's knee, quieting her ongoing attempts at explaining away his odd choice of gift.

"I apologize, Mr. and Mrs. Granger. I did not realize my gift was—so unusual."

He very much wished for the brandy to knock him out. He needed more, significantly more.

Mr. Granger drained his glass and picked up the mounted jawbone, examining the display.

"It has"—he looked to his wife as if searching for the right word—"lovely teeth. Could have used a dentist though."

Hermione groaned as her parents laughed, a kind of tension breaking through the stifling discomfort in the room. Draco could do nothing but pinch the bridge of his nose, incapable of meeting anyone's eye, while willing the heat beneath his skin to subside. He needed to reconsider how often he made Hermione blush, having recently experienced so much of it himself. Mortification threatened to crack his bones to bits.

—

"Thank you for coming," Hermione said with a small sway, feet unsteady as they apparated to his flat. "I think that's the longest uninterrupted time I've spent with them since before the war."

She hugged him, sliding her hands into his back pockets under what he suspected was a guise of steadying herself. Draco's embarrassing gift giving had required several glasses of wine and bouts of giggling between Hermione and her mother in order to come to an agreement that Draco was not, in fact, slightly insane.

"Are you certain you want to thank me?" he asked, sweeping her curls over one shoulder, thumb brushing across her cheekbone. "They—must think I'm very strange."

"They do." She preempted his instinct to put space between them by pulling him closer instead. "But they think most things about the

wizarding world are strange—which is better than the outright contempt they had for it a couple of years ago. That could have gone”—she sighed, resting her cheek against his chest—“much worse.”

He wrapped his arms around her.

“Happy to mitigate the damage with my decided failure of a gift.”

She chuckled, coasting warm breath through the fabric of his shirt.

“You mitigated it with your excellent manners and preternatural charm.”

“I was raised by Narcissa Malfoy, after all.”

He stilled, not realizing what he’d said until he said it. He never quite knew how to talk about his parents around her. He hadn’t told her about his morning, about telling his parents that she was the woman in his life. He didn’t want to bring it up now, either, knowing that his parents’ negative reaction would sully the lovely buzz of alcohol they shared.

Hermione seemed neither to notice nor take offense. Instead, she squeezed his backside from inside his pockets, giggling as she did, forcing a laugh from him in return.

“So handsy when you drink,” he said, leaning to kiss the crown of her head, lost for a moment in a wild, lovely tangle of curls.

She made a happy, humming sound against his chest before she leaned back, a smirk twisting her lips.

“You don’t mind.”

“Not a bit. I’d say I’m strongly in favor, in fact. But I’d like to give you your gift before you have your wicked way with me.”

He looped his hands beneath the crook of her elbows, lifting her arms and removing her hands from his pockets. She pouted, the ghost of a smirk twitching at the edges of her mouth. He would have kissed the look from her face if he felt confident enough it wouldn’t entirely sidetrack him.

He led her towards the green sofa and nearly jumped out of his own skin at her squeal of delight. She grabbed her copy of *The Count of*

Monte Cristo from the coffee table, noting his bookmark in the back cover.

She looked up at him with lifted brows, with a smile, with a bit more hope than he deserved. He sank onto a velvet cushion.

“That is not my gift,” he said. “It’s already yours.”

She sighed, rolled her eyes, and shook her head all at once. She curled up next to him on the sofa, limbs loose as she tucked her feet beneath her.

“Did you finish it?” she asked, tugging at the bookmark in the back of the book.

“I did.”

“And?”

“Haven’t I made this Christmas uncomfortable enough, what with my gift to your parents—”

“You *still* didn’t like it?”

He wished he’d let her have her way with him. And that he’d had the foresight not to leave that book right there on the table in the middle of his living room, knowing he intended on bringing her home with him tonight and, ideally, not letting her leave until morning. Or perhaps, ever.

“It was not to my tastes,” he said. Simple, without judgement. A fact.

“Your tastes? Well, maybe if we discussed some of its—”

“—Hermione—”

“—you know, thoughtful discussion can sometimes illuminate things you might not have—”

“—Hermione, I hated it.”

Her hands, which had been holding the book as a prop between them, a reference for her passion, dropped. Draco winced as the book landed with a thud against his thigh.

“But I love you,” he said. Then, with a smirk, “So, I won’t hold your literature preferences against you.”

“Against me? *Against me?* What do you— *I* should be holding it against you.”

He knew that would wind her up; he laughed. He pried the book from her grip, ignoring her indignant little huff, and set it aside on the table.

“Of all the things you could hold against me, this isn’t it.”

She softened, affront draining.

“I wish you’d stop saying things like that.”

“It’s the truth.”

She frowned, lifting a hand to cradle his jaw. A year ago, the contented little noise originating in the back of his throat, almost inaudible, would have embarrassed him with its raw vulnerability. In the present, he raised his hand and placed it atop hers, extending his moment of contact for several thumps of his heart, beating behind his eardrums.

Regretfully, he peeled her hand from his face, dropping a kiss on her knuckles before releasing her entirely.

“May I give you your gift now?” he asked.

She sighed, letting the sound dance through her throat, deepening into a giggle. Gods, she was beautiful.

“I suppose you can,” she said with a long-suffering tone of obligation. She smirked. “I’m not sure how you can possibly top last year’s literally life-changing, bespoke, experimental potion.” She waved her hand as if the whole affair were beneath her, pulling her lips between her teeth as she fought a laugh. “Impress me,” she said: an order, a command, a new ideology around which to build his entire purpose.

When her eyes met his, she stilled, perhaps noticing the severity of his look, or the way the tone in the room had shifted, or the way his hand, formerly resting on her knee, had crept closer to her thigh, hardly acknowledged by either of them. She swallowed, and he watched the motion travel down her neck, knowing intimately how that action felt beneath his lips.

He cleared his throat, dragging his eyes from her skin. “Now, before you try to insist we’re not together—and I would be sorely offended

should you do such a thing—know that this is not jewelry.”

He pulled a small velvet box from his pocket. “Not jewelry,” he said again, watching her eyes widen briefly.

She leaned forward, perched on her knees and hovering for a moment as she steadied herself. She kissed him, meant as a quick action that he stole more from, his other hand finding the back of her neck, threaded into her curls. He took her quick reassurance of a kiss and made it his own: a brush of his tongue, a piece of his soul.

Just in case.

She braced herself on his shoulders, not pulling away even as the kiss broke.

“We’re definitely together,” she said, an arrow of honesty nocked and aimed so perfectly at his heart that it pierced him with barely a breath’s worth of effort.

“That’s good.” His voice came out hoarse, nowhere near as sure as he’d wanted it. He pressed the box into her hands, pushing her gently to lean back on her heels against the cushions again.

“In fact,” he said as she opened the velvet box, “I’d like to be together more regularly.”

“A—piece of parchment?” she asked, pulling a tightly folded parchment from the box. “With spells on it? What are these? They look like—”

“My wards. Here. I—I know you’ve been keyed into them for a while, but I wanted you to have the spellwork, to know it. You should always know the wards to”—a pause, a gulp, a leap—“your home.”

If Draco’s heart beat any harder, he might need a visit to St. Mungo’s for certain spontaneous combustion.

She read the spells silently.

“I—was hoping you would want to live here. With me. Together.” He couldn’t seem to stop talking in the absence of any sort of response from her. “You’re here so often already. And I don’t especially enjoy watching you leave, and that flat of yours—it’s just so small. I have the space—”

Draco's fingers prickled, the surface of his skin suddenly vibrating at the same rate his heart hammered in his chest. It might have been easier when she told him they weren't in a relationship. At least then she'd said something. Now, she'd yet to tear her eyes from the parchment in her hands.

Carefully, she refolded it and returned it to the box, snapping the lid shut, flinching at the sound.

"That's—are you sure?" she asked. "I've never lived with someone before, outside of school, that is. Never with—Ron and I never even —"

"Please don't compare this to him."

"No, I didn't mean it that way." She finally looked up at him. "Crookshanks could come, too?"

His breath rushed from him in a surprised gust.

"What? Yes—of course, Crookshanks would come, too." Draco blinked. Was that *really* a question?

She clutched her heart: literally, hand to chest, fingers flexing at the neckline of her dress, leaving red splotches on the skin dragged beneath her fingertips. She looked like she was experiencing physical pain, confusion etched in the furrow between her brows and the tight pursing at her lips.

Draco cracked a knuckle, fingers pulled so tightly into a fist that his thumb popped from the force, startling in the silence.

"If you need time to think about it—of course. That's—I completely understand." And he did. Except that he didn't. He wanted Hermione Granger in his life, all the time. He wanted a piece of every day in her heavily scheduled week, and that probably made him exceedingly selfish, but it didn't change the intensity of the want, the need. Self-consciousness heated him, creeping towards a boil in his throat. The idea that she might not feel similarly, want similarly, burned away all the brandy he'd had to drink, all the liquor he'd used to find bravery.

"What will your parents say?" she asked, deep crevices of confusion finally relinquishing their hold on her features. They smoothed as she asked the question that presumably bothered her the most.

Draco, mostly relieved she'd said something, had no control over the

laugh that escaped his throat.

“I already told them.”

Hermione’s gaze snapped to his before he’d even finished his sentence.

“You what?”

“I told them. About you, well—I told them I was spending the day with you and your muggle parents and that you were my girlfriend and I love you and—”

She had her hand at her mouth, covering her awe.

“I told you this was real,” he said. “It was the most defiant I’ve ever been. I—I disarmed my mother. I just left them there and went to you. I think it was brave? You’re a horrible influence, really.”

He saw the moment her shock shifted into something else, something exciting, something that looked an awful lot like she might be several seconds from launching herself at him, from having her way with him as earlier promised.

But then the owl rapped on his window.

—

“What does it say?” Hermione asked, delivering the whisky he’d requested. Draco needed substantially more alcohol in his body to handle a letter from his parents, considering the state he’d left them in.

He stood near the window, watching the owl’s wingspan silhouetted against the moon as it flew away. He ought to close the window, but the chill did something to brace him, reminding him of the sharp difference between the pleasant warmth cozied there, with Hermione, and the consequences of actions he’d taken that morning, knowing they would not be met favorably, but done all the same.

He thought about burning the parchment, throwing it out his window, vanishing it, flushing it down the toilet for all he cared. And yet, he couldn’t seem to unclench his fist, bunching it in his hand, crinkling it where he couldn’t quite let it go.

“I want us to have a nice holiday,” he said, looking neither at Hermione nor the letter. He blindly accepted the drink she’d brought over, stared at the amber liquid, and then set it down on the windowsill.

He changed his mind. He was already comfortably buzzed, happy and pleasant. He didn’t want to tip that scale into something desperate, not at his parents’ words delivered at the end of the day.

“Draco.”

Her hand found his shoulder before it slipped down his back. Ultimately, she settled on encircling his waist from behind. He could feel her lips pressed between his shoulder blades. “What does it say?” she asked again.

“They want you removed. From the decommissioning. They’ve said they plan to inquire with the Ministry.”

Her hands squeezed him for a flash before she broke away, stepping back. He turned when he heard her sharp intake of breath, his own wallowing abandoned the moment he saw the shine in her eyes, glassy, as her jaw clenched tight.

“I’ve been nothing but professional,” she said. Then, quieter, “Mostly.” She wrapped her arms across her front, gripping her waist with pointed, painful-looking fingers digging into her sides.

He’d be a fool if he thought she hadn’t kept track of every kiss, every touch, that happened while she was meant to be working. That guilt crashed with the force of a rockslide spilling across her face, stone after stone beating her sense of professionalism, the sensibilities that she took so seriously.

“My career,” she whispered. It wasn’t so much a statement as it was a question. Perhaps a eulogy.

“Hermione you haven’t done anything wrong. They have no basis to have you removed—you’ve done incredible work.”

He pulled her to his chest, hands threading through her hair, a stroke at her jaw, a brush of her arm, a pressure to her waist. Any motion, any action he could conceive to quell her worry. With both hands occupied by comforting her, he realized he’d dropped his parents’ letter somewhere between worrying about himself and worrying about her.

“Don’t let them do this,” he whispered into her hair. “Don’t let them ruin a nice”—she wrapped her arms around his waist, finally unwinding the self-soothing she’d been engaged in—“mostly not-awkward holiday that we got to spend together.” Her breath came out in a stutter, an acoustic laugh against his chest.

She slipped her hands into his back pockets again.

“Did it say anything else?” she asked, melted against him.

“My father has revoked control of the account I was managing.” He forced a small shrug. “I hated it anyway so—”

It still hurt. And he hated that it did, as much as—perhaps more than—he hated the account itself. He didn’t want its loss to mean anything.

“You’re disappointed,” she said, as if counting the scale of his conflict in the beats of his heart.

“But I don’t regret it.”

The chill from the open window stopped feeling like a reminder of the balance—the push and pull his life required of him—and felt instead like a creeping threat, seeping beneath his shirt, attacking his skin. His only defense: Hermione’s arms, wrapped around him and providing a tiny scion of warmth to batter the cold.

“You’d hoped you could have both,” she said.

“I dare say I was optimistic. I told you, you’ve been a terrible influence on me.”

“We should talk about this again tomorrow,” she said. “When we’re not both so tipsy.”

“You’re probably right.”

He knew she was. He couldn’t separate the types of heat in his blood: liquor, guilt, love, longing, failure, shame. They felt so similar, so jumbled. A twisted tangle of confusion where one kind of heat gave him the woman in his arms, a kind of comfort, of love. And another gave him shame for having failed his father again—and again—and perhaps for the last time? Or just another one of many?

What did it matter if he couldn’t tell one type of heat from the other,

if they all boiled his blood in the end? Did it matter what burned him alive, after the fact? He'd welcomed it once, at the behest of Hermione's touch. Ruin had felt romantic, then. Now, it mostly felt like disappointment.

"I keep going back and forth," he said, quietly, to a curl in his periphery, glinting golden as it swayed in the tiniest gusts of cold winter air. "I need—lines. Clear lines. Not this winding, meandering back and forth. I keep gaining ground with Father and then losing it nearly as fast."

He dropped his head to the top of hers, requiring her support lest he fall—down, apart, or back in line—she held him up. Had he done this to himself? When he first came back to England, it had all looked so simple: a clear path with a clean, straightforward relationship with his father, a healthier power dynamic.

But it hadn't been simple at all. He'd fumbled, he'd fallen apart. He'd barely put up a fight, accepting a betrothal, accepting what his father wanted of him. He'd touched a time turner nearly as soon as he'd returned, and who knew how that act alone had sent cracks spiderwebbing across his life's trajectory. Was any of this meant to happen? Was anything *meant* at all?

He held her tight, an anchor in a choppy sea as he lost sight of the shoreline, drowning in an expanse of self-doubts and what-ifs and regrets.

"Maybe this is your line," she said as her hand rubbed a calming path up and down his back. They'd stood there long enough that the chill had taken over, more cold air than warm inside his flat.

His bones pulled him down, heavy inside his skin. Guilt was an exhausting thing.

"What do you mean?" he asked, finally lifting his head from the cushion her curls offered, leaning back so he could see her face.

"Here, tonight. You and me. Maybe this is the clear line you need between who you are and who your parents want you to be." She gave him a small smile, and he realized she'd been crying, tiny watery trails slipping from the corners of her eyes. "Does it make me conceited to think that me moving in with you might be worthy of such a thing?"

The heat he'd thought might burn him up buoyed him against the chill instead, a new flood spiraling from his chest.

“Are you? Moving in with me?”

“You’ve spent an awful lot of time being ahead of me in this relationship,” she said, definitely not an answer to his question. “I don’t like coming in second. But—I like even less that you keep choosing me and, well, you should know, I’m choosing you, too. I’m sorry it’s taken me so long to catch up.”

Fuck her apology; he would have waited however long it took.

He could have kissed her. He could have fucked her. He could have done any number of things. But instead, he nearly crumbled, holding her as close as possible.

“This is the line,” he said, words nearly drowned out by his pulse roaring inside his skull.

He almost didn’t hear her, head buried in her curls once again. *I love you.*

It came through louder the second time, as she broke from their hold, hands cradling his face, steadying him. “I love you,” she said on a whooshing kind of breath, as if she had to force it out. She smiled, saying it again, steadier this time. “I love you.”

When she’d said it that afternoon, he hadn’t had the chance to respond, not properly.

Now, he had the pleasure of saying, “I love you, *too.*”

She dragged her bottom lip between her teeth, fighting the motion with a smile that stretched her mouth wide, beaming. Her hands glided down his neck, down his chest, before winding their way around his torso again.

“Crookshanks is going to love that sofa,” she said, laughing into his shirt like it was the funniest thing in the entire world.

In their world, in that moment, it was.

Chapter End Notes

and with that, 2003 has come to a close and we are OFFICIALLY at the halfway point in this story! can you believe it?? thank you everyone so, so, so, SO much for your ongoing support and enthusiasm! i adore and appreciate you all so much! thank you

for your comments, for your kudos, for you messages and your asks and your discord comments. thank you for recommending this story to others and sharing your excitement with me! i can't believe how far we've come, and we still have so much more to go!! <3

many and eternal thanks to [icepower55](#), [Endless_musings](#), and [persephone_stone](#)!

Chapter 25: -1.083, -1.166, -1.250

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Part Three: 2004

*“In my beginning is my end. In succession
Houses rise and fall, crumble, are extended,
Are removed, destroyed, restored, or in their place
Is an open field, or a factory or a by-pass.”*

— T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*, East Coker

—

January

tick tock tick tock

“You’re sure you don’t want me to come with you?” Hermione asked, perched on the foot of his bed, legs tucked beneath her, hair wild and bedraggled.

Draco secured the button on one of his cuffs, fighting the urge to run a hand through his own hair, or perhaps hers. “Trust me, it certainly isn’t a matter of *want*.”

He sighed, sitting next to her as she reached out, taking his other arm and fastening his cuff for him. “I haven’t seen my parents in nearly two weeks. We—have to talk. About so much. And I think your presence would only irritate an already raw wound”—he glanced at her—“don’t you?”

She considered it, fingers idly entwining with his as she did. Her grip tightened, pressure increasing with the force of her thoughts.

“If you think any harder you’re going to break my fingers.” Carefully,

he pulled his hand from her grip, massaging his knuckles.

She clasped her hands together.

“I feel sick to my stomach,” she finally said.

“It’s been two weeks. They clearly haven’t said anything to the Ministry—at least nothing the Ministry has taken seriously. It’s already well known how much they don’t want you working in the manor—I can guarantee no one will take my parents seriously should they file a complaint against you.”

He’d lost track of how many times he’d told her as much, tried to convince and reassure and melt the tense knots in her neck where she hoarded her anxieties.

She untucked her legs and swung them over the edge of the bed, mouth tight and twisting towards a frown.

“They”—she pulled at a curl, stretching it taut as she struggled to vocalize whatever thought had stalled in her throat—“should be taken seriously. If they have a complaint. Their concerns should be heard fairly.”

Draco liberated the tortured curl from her fingers, allowing it to spring back into place. With a quiet laugh, he swept her hair away and dropped a kiss to her exposed shoulder.

“You don’t want them to interfere with your work, but you want them to be allowed to? Because it’s fair?” He chuckled against her skin. “You beautiful witch.”

“You’ll ask them?”

“Yes. I’ll find a way to make sure they don’t take their anger out on you and your career.”

Somehow, he’d find a way to work that point in. He dreaded navigating the long overdue conversation with his parents regarding the breadth and depth of his omission that he’d been in a relationship with Hermione for as long as he had. He’d not spoken to them since Christmas, apart from the owl required to coordinate and confirm that he would take breakfast with them that morning.

A small, guilty, part of him missed the routine, especially since Hermione wouldn’t be moving in until later in the month. He’d found

his days off to a strange, lonely start without his family. Even if he didn't so much enjoy the conversation or the company, the routine had an engrained place in his day-to-day. Outside of his time spent at Hogwarts and living abroad, he took almost every breakfast and dinner with his parents; not doing so had been a strange, surreal sort of shift he didn't know if he should celebrate or mourn.

Draco did not enjoy eating alone. He preferred to start his day with family, with a routine that launched his day forward.

Hermione relaxed against him.

"Thank you," she said. "You should get going. And I need to get ready for work. I'll see you for dinner, yes?"

Draco smiled as she rose, launching into her own morning routine. He kissed her goodbye and marvelled at the oddity of it all: the two of them preparing to go to the same place, separately, and for vastly different reasons.

—

Narcissa greeted him in the dining room as if nothing were amiss, as if he hadn't been absent from their family meals for the past two weeks, and as if his last appearance hadn't entirely disrupted the peaceful facade they'd all been hiding behind. Lucius barely greeted him at all, sitting calmly at the head of the table with a copy of the *Prophet* open in front of him. A disinterested—normal—welcome.

Draco sat in his usual seat across from his mother, accepting the cup of tea she poured for him. The muscles around his mouth ached, strained from forced neutrality as he maintained a steady show of being unaffected by the disconcerting normalcy around him.

His mother said something about having recently tried a new tea blend. His father said something about Ministry overreach with exotic herb imports. Normal, safe, unexciting conversation topics crisscrossed the table, conversations that had nothing to do with Hermione, or Draco's omissions, or the fact that he hadn't joined them for a meal in a fortnight.

Draco nodded a thanks to Topsy as she served him a plate of eggs,

tomatoes, toast, and an assortment of melon balls topped with fresh cream. She returned a moment later with a collection of flavored butters, jams, and aiolis. On the other side of the table, Tilly served a tray of smoked salmon and toast points, followed by a second tray filled to bursting with a variety of sausages. Between Topsy and Tilly, the table filled quickly with a veritable feast's worth of food.

Somewhat stunned, Draco ripped his gaze from the spread in front of him and looked up at his mother. She merely offered him a serene smile and speared a melon ball from her plate.

"The weather has been lovely so far this year, an appropriate chill for the season. Wouldn't you say, darling?" she asked Draco as he contemplated whether or not he had the appetite for anything on the table.

Almost involuntarily, his eyes flickered to his father before he answered.

"It's been nice," Draco said. "Crisp."

"Indeed. We haven't even had to renew the manor's warming charms this season. I do enjoy a mild winter. Don't you, Lucius?"

"Mild, yes." His voice travelled through the paper in front of him, muffled by the barrier of black and white ink.

Narcissa smiled.

Draco broke the yolk on his poached egg, watching as it ran into his toast.

"Did you have the opportunity to see Theo and Blaise over the holidays, Draco?"

He forced a bite of breakfast into his mouth, trying to avoid his mother's question for as long as possible. And for a moment, he forgot he'd been asked anything at all, savoring the rich, buttery quality of a runny yolk as it coated his tongue. *Gods*, he'd missed elf cooking.

He swallowed, resisting the urge to immediately take another bite and prolong his conversation avoidance. His mother's eyes followed him: from his fork to his mouth to his plate to his hands to his unease. He cleared his throat, hand beneath the table, fisting his cloth serviette.

"Yes. We did. We spent New Year's with them, actually."

We. A plural pronoun. A declaration. A sideways acknowledgement. An inescapable truth.

Narcissa escaped it with a smile and a glance towards Lucius.

“We should have those boys over for dinner sometime soon. Don’t you think, Lucius? It’s been so long since we’ve seen them.”

Lucius folded his paper, setting it aside. Draco had never known such a simple act could feel so damning, so weighted.

“Indeed, it has been. Perhaps dinner this weekend.”

Narcissa nodded as Draco stared, trying to make sense of this strange, surface-level conversation.

On the surface of a frozen pool, if they talked softly enough—skated delicately enough around the things they did not wish to acknowledge—they could avoid the cracks, avoid a dip into frozen waters and deeper conversation.

Draco swiped his toast through the runny yolk on his plate, revealing the blue willow pattern beneath. Not knowing what else to do, he took a bite, caught on a string pulled tight between his parents, balancing the fine line they’d drawn for him.

“That would be lovely,” his mother said. “Perhaps you can see if your friends have availability this weekend, Draco.”

He stared at her, savoring a bite of cream-topped cantaloupe: ridiculously out of season melons served fresh in the beginning of January. His mouth pulled tight after he swallowed, confusion held in pursed lips. His brow twitched from the force required to prevent it drawing together.

Lucius spoke before Draco could decide if this surreal and extravagant meal was a dream, a nightmare, or an accidental peek into a window through time. “I hear Mr. Zabini has developed quite the skillset for financial investments.”

“He has.” Draco clutched his serviette tighter beneath the table, at a loss as to whether or not he was meant to be offended by that statement. It was the closest they’d come to acknowledging the account Lucius had taken from him two weeks before.

Narcissa gave Lucius a sharp, singular look, as if to say he’d tread too

close to the thing Draco now realized they were all pretending didn't exist: his relationship with Hermione and the fallout from announcing it to them.

Draco hated the relief he felt in not having to have that conversation. It felt like an offering in a way: the quiet between battles in a larger war. Time to regroup, tend to one's wounds, and consider the lengths to which one was willing to go in order to win.

He could accept a temporary cessation of aggressions in exchange for the first semi-pleasant family meal he'd had in months.

Just shy of nine, when his mother set her serviette atop the table to signal the end to their meal, she asked a question that shattered the illusion.

She rose from her chair, forcing eye contact. Her brows furrowed: a question in her face more than her words.

"We'll look forward to seeing you for dinner, darling. We have missed you."

Draco's heart sank, a quick clench and pulse of guilt shooting from behind his ribs. He stilled, only partly risen from his own seat, utterly immobilized by the question in his mother's voice and the slightly wide, wondering eyes she sent him.

He recovered, standing to his full height. He could feel Lucius watching him from the head of the table, a quietness creeping across the tablecloth, steeped with judgement. Narcissa's expression tightened as her questioning eyes narrowed, lips pulling thin across her teeth. She didn't allow such an unflattering expression to last.

"Unless"—a smile melted the tension lines in her face—"you already have other plans?"

She'd given him an offering, forced through a pleasant smile. It felt both like an opportunity to retreat and his last chance to make a stand. Draco tried. He did.

"I do, with—"

"Then breakfast tomorrow," she said, cutting him off. Her smile grew, flashing perfect teeth that had never seen a dentist in all their days. It keenly reminded Draco of another meal, another family: another life, altogether, it seemed.

Lucius finally stood, stern gaze dissecting Draco before he nodded a perfunctory farewell, excusing himself—and therefore the rest of them—from the dining room. Draco wondered, if not for the table between them, if Narcissa might have tried to hug him then, or offer him a brief kiss on the cheek in farewell, or squeeze his arm, his hand, some kind of contact in goodbye. But the table separated them, weighed down by several course's worth of food, barely touched. Her smile quirked instead, a silent acknowledgement that didn't come anywhere close to meeting her eyes.

Left alone, surrounded by a feast and confusion and more guilt than he'd started with, Draco called for Topsy.

His chest felt hot, churning with disappointment. He'd been lulled into complacency with a delicious meal and something that tasted almost like forgiveness, like acceptance. But he'd failed Hermione spectacularly. He'd spent the last hour accepting a charade that ignored her importance in his life. Further, he failed to inquire about whether or not his parents still intended on trying to have her removed from the manor's decommissioning.

With the *crack* of Topsy's arrival, Draco vowed to do better the next morning. This had been a fluke, a complete surprise at odds with everything he expected from his parents. He hadn't been prepared. He hadn't pivoted fast enough. But that didn't mean he couldn't, or wouldn't.

Conversations with his parents—important conversations, especially—took time, they took finesse. If anything, their demeanor this morning had only proven that he couldn't brute force Hermione into their lives. Gryffindor tactics wouldn't work on these Slytherins; this would require skill. And time. He had plenty of time. And a willingness to invest.

—

“I don't understand where all this stuff came from. The books especially.”

Draco fell back onto the velvet sofa in his—their—living room, surrounded by more boxes than he could count, recently re-enlarged after several trips through the Floo from Hermione's tiny former flat

and into his—again, theirs. He loved remembering that, a quick cognitive correction to remind him that this space no longer belonged exclusively to him. While sharing his things had never been a particularly favorite pastime for Draco, somehow sharing with Hermione felt like a gift, like she'd given something to him instead of taking up the spaces that formerly belonged exclusively to him.

“The books should not surprise you,” she said on the edge of a laugh, taking a large step over a box separating her from the sofa. With a small hop, she landed next to him, wedging herself into his side. “Can you imagine doing that without magic?”

He couldn't. They'd mostly just shrunk and unshrunk the plethora of boxes Hermione had packed and prepared, bringing them through the Floo, and finding a place to unshrink them before sorting through it all, combining her things with his.

“I just don't know where you kept them all. You had a very small flat and”—he gestured to the obstacle course of boxes littering the living room—“I'm starting to suspect you've cast more than one illegal extension charm in your day. There's no way these all fit.”

She leaned against him, hands idly trailing up and down his pant leg, a light massage on his thigh.

“I might have been using most of my meager closet space to stack some of my lesser used titles.”

Draco swallowed against a groan in the back of his throat as her hand continued its entirely innocent touch. Casual, absent-minded, but still shooting desire up and down his spine.

He placed his hand atop hers to stop the drag of her knuckles. He glanced sideways, giving her a look— *the* look—that said she better have intentions of following through with her touch if she wanted to keep going. She blinked three times as she registered his expression and the implication behind it.

The first blink was sheepish.

The second, coy.

The third, mischievous.

She released a breath and sat up, away from him, to his immense disappointment. Rapidly, his disappointment cycled through surprise

and satisfaction when she twisted, raising onto her knees, and lifting one leg over him, straddling his lap.

It was his turn: hands on the tops of her thighs, creeping higher, around her arse, pulling her flush against him.

“I was thinking,” she said as she looped her arms around his neck, frustratingly out of reach for a kiss.

He grinned. “Well that’s unexpected and entirely out of character. Go on.”

“How do I win this sofa if we’re sharing it now? I would hate to miss out on winning this bet that I’m highly invested in over a technicality of shared ownership.”

She smiled, pulling the edge of her lower lip between her teeth. Draco played with the waistband of her denims, fingertips hopping from skin to fabric and back again.

“Would you prefer we make it magically binding? A spell to transfer ownership and possession should you fulfill the terms of our agreement?” He shifted, one arm wrapped around her waist to hold her steady as he tilted them, pulling his wand from his pocket. “I’ve done several with Theo and Blaise over the years.”

She laughed, shrugged, nodded. Draco mumbled the simple wager spell.

A golden cord slithered from the tip of his wand, coiling around Hermione’s wrist, then Draco’s. It glowed brief but bright, before releasing them and disappearing into the sofa’s fabric.

Hermione tilted her head, watching him.

“So that’s it? When I reach Eliot, the sofa is mine? Magically? Permanently?”

Draco laughed, discarding his wand beside them.

“I think you underestimate how highly invested *I* am in winning.” His fingers hopped from fabric to skin again, slipping beneath her jumper, counting vertebrae in her back as he meandered up and down her spine.

She shivered. “I had another thought, too.”

“Oh?”

“Lines. We—got lucky that your parents haven’t implied anything untoward about my performance to the Ministry. And you said you need clearer lines too, so—”

She smirked, ducked closer, pressed her palms to his chest. Muggle denims were both a blessing and a curse: her arse always looked so lovely in them, but now, straddled across his not-so-inconspicuous erection, he wished desperately for fewer, flimsier, layers between them.

“This. Here. This is us, together.” She placed a kiss at his jawline. It struck Draco, with a sort of distinct absurdity, that he was in the process of being seduced. Specifically, seduced as a means to make him more amenable to whatever it was she wanted from him. It was downright Slytherin of her, and he didn’t mind in the slightest. Instead, he pulled her hips closer and explored her clavicle with his tongue. “But there, that’s my work. And it’s not your home anymore. I think you should stop supervising me. We need clearer lines between personal and professional.”

She pulled back, enough to look him in the eyes, to gauge his response.

The tiny furrow between her brows said she expected him to disagree. In reality, he’d been considering the same thing himself.

“I agree,” he said. “I’ll tell my parents that Topsy or Tilly can do it, and that will be that.”

He silenced the protest he saw forming on her mouth with a roll of his hips as he skated one hand up her ribs, towards the side of her breast. He could play at the same game she did; he’d taught it to her, after all. What might have been a complaint about having the elves do his bidding turned into a stuttering breath he swallowed with a kiss.

She allowed him to kiss her in a lazy, unhurried sort of way. Warm, wet lips, languid tongues, slow asphyxiation by shared air, a closed system of recycled breathing. The way a couple might kiss when neither had anywhere else to be, because they were already home. She pulled away with a reluctant noise just as his left hand made contact with the clasp of her bra.

“Are you sure you can do that? Truly—I don’t mean to be cruel, but it doesn’t seem like much of, well, substance, is happening at those

meals you've been taking with them."

He froze, watching as the regret filtered through her expression. He indulged in a long blink, seeking safety behind darkened eyelids as he sorted anger from guilt. She wasn't necessarily wrong, but she'd said it terribly. She'd said it exactly how she expected him to with his parents: straightforward, to the point, like going toe to toe with Lucius Malfoy on her very first day in the manor. But she'd only experienced the satisfaction of that moment; Draco had been forced to endure the aftermath.

"Yes. I can," he said through a tight jaw. "They've actually been quite amenable to most topics so long as you aren't explicitly named."

He felt horrible the moment he said it. He'd told her about the surreal avoidance exercises that dining with his parents had become, but laying it out in such a straightforward way—not unlike how she wanted him to tackle it—he saw the disappointment flexing at the corner of her eyes. So close, he wanted nothing more than to kiss that tension away.

"I imagine it might be difficult to avoid my name if I'm the topic of conversation."

He pulled his hand from where it still rested against the bare skin of her waist, tucking a wild bunch of curls away from her face.

"It's not as straightforward as you—or I—would like, but I will tell them. You work there. I have family meals there. *We* live here. Together."

She held his gaze for several heartbeats too many, just enough that he'd started to rethink his words, ruthlessly assessing them for the flaw, for his error. He began preparing an alternative, something to convince her that he meant it, that she could trust him, that he would do anything to preserve this precious thing quite literally in his lap.

But then she leaned in, face hovering so close he could feel heat from her skin radiating oh-so-gently onto his, spiraling similar warmth inside him.

"We should probably start organizing my books," she said, voice barely above a whisper as a grin pulled her mouth wide, beautiful and teasing as she let her forehead rest against his.

Draco allowed himself a dramatic groan.

“You’re certain? It may take us all night, especially with that extensive collection of biographies you have.”

Her laugh coasted through him, winding itself around every bone in his back, encircling his esophagus, settling in his stomach. It became him: a lovely, joyous sensation. He’d not known a woman’s laugh could do that, transform him as effectively as polyjuice into someone lighter, someone more hopeful. Or perhaps it wasn’t any woman’s laugh, just this woman’s. *His*.

“It’s especially extensive in the ‘E’ sections, but you wouldn’t know anything about that, would you?”

Diversion via seduction came back into play, but the Quaffle had entered his half of the pitch. He surged forward, mouth meeting the juncture between her throat and jaw, hands driving her hips against his. He felt the surprised rush of air escape her throat as he sucked on a spot that vibrated with her whimper.

“This flat is very large,” he said between nips and sucks and brushes of tongue against her skin, cataloguing the expanse she’d left wide open as she tilted her head back, opening herself up. “We’ll find a home for them.”

Her fingers threaded through his hair, short nails dragging along his scalp as they sent a small series of pinpricks cascading down his spine, tangled up with the sound of her laughter, and the desire from her touch.

He kissed her jaw, down her throat, to her clavicle where he reluctantly pulled his hands from her waist to shove her jumper up and over her head, deposited somewhere amongst the many boxes surrounding them.

Revealing a whole new swath of skin, Draco wandered; he explored; he made a leisurely activity of kissing a slow trail along the ridge of her collarbone. When he reached her shoulder, he dropped a kiss to it before following it with a gentle drag of his teeth, smiling as her laughter filled every last empty crevice in his—their—home.

She sighed as her laughter quieted, fingers dancing down his chest—when had she undone his buttons?

He smirked to disguise the catch in his breathing when her hands dipped to his belt line. “On the topic of lines and boundaries. Would it be crossing any to write myself into that planner of yours?”

The sound his belt made as she pulled it through the metal buckle felt obscenely loud, clanging throughout the room as she considered his question. His heartbeat jumped from his chest to his neck, pounding behind his throat, ascending towards his ears, drowning everything else out as she burned him with her touch.

“And where would you write yourself in?” she asked, matching his smirk with a cheeky grin of her own. His belt buckle clattered: the sound of leather being pulled through wool belt loops.

“Most places. Everywhere, every day. A little sex here”—he swallowed the groan that nearly spilled out when she unbuttoned his trousers—“a little cuddling there. Perhaps some wooing. A few dates”—she scooted her hips back so she could unzip his trousers, palming his erection as she did so. His voice wavered—“you know, typical things that boyfriends can do when they aren’t beholden to a single, measly day of the week.”

His head fell back against the sofa; that had been one of the most difficult sentences he’d ever had to speak in his life. She took no pity on him, pulling his cock free of his pants and giving it one slow, measured pump as she smiled a wide, innocent smile at him. He’d forgotten who was meant to be in charge of this seduction. If it was meant to be him, he’d lost control of it entirely.

“You sound like you might be a bit bitter about that one day of the week thing.”

“Bitter? Me? That’s absurd.” He rallied, lifting his head and pressing his lips to hers before she could waylay him any further. If not for those fucking denims, he would have pulled her back on top of him, thrusting against her out of desperation for more contact. But that was another thing he’d learned very quickly about her denims: they could rub a man raw. “However,” he added against her lips, leaving her almost no space to rebut or regain her control. “Fuck only having you on Saturdays.”

“You can have me now,” she breathed. In the space of a single blink, Draco realized that this, indeed, had become his new reality—any day he wanted with her, he could have—she pulled her wand from her pocket and vanished the rest of their clothes.

The denims made her arse look fantastic. But he much preferred her without them.

“Right there, right on that sofa. I’m telling you, Potter; you don’t want to sit there.”

Theo was drunk. Draco could see it from the moment he arrived at his and Hermione’s housewarming get together. Not exactly a full party, more of a small gathering of their friends—their first attempt at *blending* said friends—and Theo had arrived drunk and a bit belligerent and utterly insistent that Potter shouldn’t sit on their green velvet sofa because of *that one time* he’d walked in on Draco and Hermione on it.

Between Draco’s general anxiety at having to spend any time around Harry Potter (would they try to kill each other? Would they accidentally become good friends? Both possibilities sounded miserable), his unsuccessful attempt to insult the Weaslette (evidently she thought it was *funny* when he said her hair gave him headaches), the fact that Hermione’s ex-boyfriend was in attendance (ex-destiny as most people seemed to see it), and Theo showing up drunk (with Blaise not far behind), their small housewarming gathering had careened off course from the very start.

Draco’s only real consolation came from the unexpectedly fine bottle of wine the Weaslette brought as a gift, which he promptly opened, lubricating his own stress with alcohol. He caught Hermione’s eye across the living room, where she’d settled into an armchair opposite Lavender Brown. She wore a tense smile on her face as she nodded along with whatever conversation she’d been sucked into. He turned, searching for more wine, only to find the Weaslette holding a filled glass out to him.

“It looks like she needs it,” Ginny offered with a bit of a smirk and—in a strange moment of solidarity—it occurred to Draco that they’d both had the same idea at the same time. “That’s Hermione’s *please-help-she’s-talking-to-me-about-tea-leaves-again* face.”

Draco made a thoughtful noise, committing the expression to memory. He took the wine glass and lifted it in thanks. “I suppose you have your uses. I see why Hermione keeps you around.”

“I’m certainly the least offensive of my siblings.”

“I’ll drink to that.” And he did, taking a sip of his own wine as he

crossed the living room, offering the new glass to Hermione. “If I could borrow Hermione? We’ve had a charcuterie emergency in the kitchen that only her expertise can solve.”

Lavender looked up at him, blinked, looked back down at the tea in her hands, and then to Hermione. “I didn’t know you had an interest in charcuterie arrangements, Hermione. We’ll have to discuss your thoughts on the controversy surrounding kosher and curing salts and their impact on crystal ball readings sometime. It’s very interesting, something about nitrites? The article I read incorporated more muggle science than I really understand, but I thought of you.”

It took most of Draco’s willpower not to laugh at the bewildered expression that took Hermione’s face hostage as she simultaneously rose from her seat, took his offering of wine, and tried her best to smile a demure sort of apology about her departure.

He pressed his mouth to her temple, attempting a mollifying kiss as he steered her towards the kitchen.

“I’m dropping you off with the Weaslette; you looked like you needed an extraction.”

“I’m happy that Ron is happy.” It sounded like something of a chant, or an attempt to convince herself.

“Are you, now?”

“You don’t need to be jealous.”

“Oh, I’m not. And do you know why?”

She rolled her eyes. As if she knew. To be fair, she probably did.

“Regale me,” she said, tipping back her glass and downing a large gulp of wine that really ought to be sipped. He savored what he was about to say, letting the smug satisfaction twist its way around every syllable. Stopping them just inside the kitchen, he leaned in close to her ear, voice quiet, as he felt her palm automatically press against the center of his chest.

“Because I know how many times I’ve made you come right there, right against that wall he’s leaning against.”

She rolled her eyes again.

“We’ve only had sex against that wall *once*.”

Ginny nearly choked on a grape, having evidently closed the distance between them. She grinned. “Scandalous, please elaborate.”

Draco’s amusement drained with all the blood from his face. Hermione only laughed as he found he didn’t quite have the courage to face the Weaslette.

“The last party you dragged me to, we needed a signal. This only solidifies it. I’m about to go wrangle Theo. If I tap my glass three times, it is your sworn duty as the love of my life to save me from being the outstanding friend to that idiot that I am.”

His heart leapt, brain catching up with the words that spilled from his mouth.

Love of my life.

Perhaps she didn’t catch it. Perhaps the Weaslette didn’t, either.

Who was he kidding? They were the two smartest people in the room besides him. Of course they caught it. He took a deep breath, steeling himself as if nothing had just happened. He kissed Hermione’s cheek.

“Wish me luck,” he whispered, retreating before either of them could begin to unpack his verbal slip.

Draco crossed the living room in several purposeful strides, hooked Theo under the elbow—interrupting a mortifying retelling of the day he’d walked in on Draco and Hermione having sex—and hauled him out onto the balcony.

“You’re very drunk.”

“It’s a Friday,” Theo said with a shrug, leaning against the railing. Draco hadn’t even noticed that Theo somehow still had a tumbler in his hand. He took a sip of his liquor.

“Must you tell everyone at our housewarming party about the incident with the sofa?”

Theo scoffed, holding his hand palm-up and balancing his glass on it. Draco watched with a sort of morbid fascination as Theo’s hand shook beneath it, sloshing the liquid enough to make him nervous.

“First of all, you’ve lived here over a year. It’s hardly a housewarming.

Second of all, I'm only informing people who try and sit on it. They have a right to know, don't you think?"

"No, I don't think. Cleansing charms do wonders for upholstery"—Theo snorted—"and it's Hermione's housewarming because *she* just moved in, so perhaps try not to ruin it by antagonizing Potter."

That earned Draco an outright laugh.

"Never in my life would I have imagined hearing *you* tell someone not to antagonize Harry Potter. Is being in love really that fantastic?"

Draco almost reeled, almost staggered back at the force of bitterness that sucked all the oxygen from the balcony.

"Are you—okay, Theo?"

Theo closed his fingers around his drink, ending whatever balancing act he'd been using to hone his attention. When he looked up at Draco, his eyes didn't fully focus. He looked caught in the foreground. Or the background.

"I think I accidentally insulted Potter."

"And I'm sure you're very proud of that." With a hesitant step, Draco reached out and took the tumbler from Theo's hand. "You seem a little—I don't know, ghostly? Strung out?" *Desperate. Sad. Drunk.*

Theo laughed through his nose, sharp puffs of air punctuating a noise that sounded far from amused. His eyes wandered wildly: from Draco, to the door back into the flat, to the balcony, to the London skyline in the distance.

"Do you ever think about the time turner?"

Draco would wonder later if his answer shouldn't have been so immediate.

"Yes."

"Do you ever wonder what we changed?"

Not if. Not *if* they'd changed. *What.*

"Sometimes," Draco admitted. "It's odd. There are moments where it pops up, in the back of my mind, a reminder—almost, that it happened. But no, I wouldn't say I think about it often."

Theo looked away, drumming his fingers on the railing.

“You would,” he said. “If something terrible happened, something you wished you could change. You’d wonder, then.”

Draco tilted his head, trying to see from a different angle: searching for his friend beneath the perennial source of clever quips and unbridled enthusiasm. Theo clearly had something— *something* —going on.

“Theo, is there something you want to—”

“I don’t think I’ve said hello to Granger, yet,” Theo said suddenly, interrupting Draco’s attempt to be a fraction of the friend Theo probably deserved. “Been here almost an hour, haven’t even seen her.”

He pushed off the railing and brushed by Draco in one single, baffling motion. Before Draco could blink the confusion from his eyes, Theo had gone, back into the flat and far away from their conversation.

Chapter End Notes

so many thanks to [icepower55](#) and [persephone_stone](#) for their beta support, as always! and a huge thanks to [Endless_musings](#) who shifted so seamlessly into an alpha capacity for the back end of this story! its getting to be a lot to juggle, and the extra hands certainly help!

as always, so many thanks to YOU for reading and commenting and kudos-ing and being generally lovely, all around awesome individuals!! i continue to be so blown away by the response to this story and that so many folks are enjoying it! thank you so, SO much for your support!! <3

Chapter 26: -1.000, -1.083, -1.166

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

February

tick tock tick tock

Breakfast with his parents felt a bit like a recurring nightmare. Except, oddly, closer to a dream. Every day still just as surreal; his parents just as obfuscating, just as disinterested in any substantial conversation as they had been since he'd returned to the manor for his daily routines in January.

On this particular morning, over a hard boiled egg and a dragon fruit Narcissa had specially sourced to add variety and intrigue to their enormous breakfast spreads, Lucius spoke freely, openly, and with only the barest hints of contempt.

“With a close eye on the Asian markets, we can track relevant climate disruptions that may impact imports. With so many rare growing zones for magical herbs and plants, their value amongst experimental portioners, especially, is paramount.”

Lucius cut the green top off a strawberry before spearing it with his fork. Draco swallowed and tried to dislodge the awe from his throat. These were the things he'd wanted to know, needed to know, long before he'd been unceremoniously handed—and ultimately, unhanded—an account in the extensive Malfoy portfolios.

“And, have there been—relevant climate disruptions?” he ventured, dragon fruit abandoned in favor of conversation.

Lucius grunted an assenting sort of noise. “Only in Tibet this year. But some prices have surged as a result of the supply shortage.”

Draco knew that. He *actually* knew that. He hadn't predicted the shortage, despite advice from Blaise and several owls to and from Gringotts about exchange rates that he hadn't fully understood. He knew the prices had surged and his holdings had suffered because supply could no longer meet demand.

Draco's fascination with the conversation evaporated, feeling more like damnation than a lesson.

"The greenhouses are blooming beautifully this year, Draco. Have you had a chance to visit them recently?"

"Not recently, Mother. No."

"You should, dear. The winter yield has been exceptionally fruitful. Tilly has done a lovely job managing them. I'm sure there are a number of ingredients you would find useful for your potions."

Topsy placed a new tray on the table, one overflowing with pastries: butter-laden, sugar-crusted, custard-filled, compote-topped, chocolate-dipped, on and on and on. Draco's stomach turned, already brimming with eggs and toast and jam and tea. But the elves kept delivering more food—a buffet before him—and his parents kept acting as if such an illustrious spread was a perfectly normal daily occurrence and not yet another strange new version of their reality.

Draco made a noncommittal noise—the barest acknowledgement that he'd heard his mother's suggestion—as he surveyed the feast. Once upon a time, he'd been desperate for something resembling normal conversation with his parents. Now, he didn't know if any of this was better, just different.

"And how are your experimental potions coming, darling?" Narcissa asked, spoon just barely tinkling against the edges of her teacup as she stirred. "You have such a bright, vibrant mind. I'm sure you've made tremendous progress in whatever you've decided to set your sights on."

Draco's diaphragm seized. His mother looked like she truly meant the compliment, fierce pride undeniable behind her eyes. It stole Draco's breath, having earned her pride in some small way.

"I haven't been doing much experimenting recently." He peeled the shell from his hard boiled egg. "I've been—rather distracted, recently."

That was his moment, his opportunity, one of many, to introduce Hermione into the conversation. It was an opening for the questions that needed to be asked and answered. *Why had he been distracted?* Well, Hermione had moved in with him and they'd begun navigating a life that integrated the both of theirs.

But instead of inquiry, a deathly kind of silence met Draco's statement. Conversation paused. Lucius cleared his throat. Narcissa sipped her tea.

Draco considered how else he might bring it up, but the air had staled: like pastries left out too long, growing stiff and unpalatable. It was a rare slip, but the strange detente of their breakfast mood had shifted into something unsavory.

Narcissa crawled out of the lingering unease first.

"What about the one you already completed, dear? It worked, did it not?"

She glanced pointedly at Draco's neck.

He resisted the urge to tug at his collar, suddenly constricting, suffocating. Of course she'd noticed. The length of his *Sectumsempra* scar that once poked out of his collar and inched towards his left ear had vanished. And while he didn't advertise or announce the change to them, Narcissa would surely have noticed such a change in his appearance. She'd been distraught over the scars in the first place, and had there not been several other life or death concerns vying for her attention, Draco imagined she would have fought tirelessly to have Harry Potter expelled for his part.

But considering that The Dark Lord moved into her home that same year, expulsion likely seemed minor in the face of planned murder.

"I—" he started. "Yes, it did work. It worked very well."

He wanted to tell her exactly how well it had worked. Draco wanted to tell both of his parents how Hermione no longer had to wear the letters Aunt Bella had carved into her skin. He was sure they would remember—after all, it had happened in this house, happened while Hermione had screamed and begged and writhed on their drawing room floor, happened not so very long ago, and surely not long enough that any of them had the right to forget.

With a tray of fancy French pastries and a previous failure at steering the conversation towards Hermione between them, Draco struggled to imagine how bringing her up now could possibly fare any better. He temporarily tabled the topic, with all the other ridiculous delicacies presented before them. He could build up to it.

"Have you thought about selling it?" Narcissa asked.

“My potion?”

She nodded.

Well, he could hardly avoid Hermione as a topic now. Perhaps this was the build, how he got there.

“It was a gift,” he said, eyes glued to the peeled egg he’d yet to take a single bite out of.

In his periphery, Draco saw his mother’s posture stiffen. Lucius picked up his paper.

Narcissa drew a deep breath through her nose before speaking. “The recipe as well? Could you not submit it for publication or sell it to St. Mungo’s?”

The muscles in Draco’s cheeks twitched; he’d never considered it.

That didn’t feel right. He’d never intended to profit from it. It had always been, and only ever intended to be, a gift. For Hermione. No one else.

Fresh guilt heated his bones.

Because surely there were others? How many people had cursed scars they wished to be free of?

He’d been quiet for too long; Narcissa cleared her throat. He didn’t have an answer for her, so he said nothing. He sliced his hard boiled egg, helped himself to a chocolate croissant, and ultimately left breakfast with a tight brow, tired from furrowing as tension took up residence in the lines on his face.

—

“Could you come sit with me?”

Draco looked up from his spot on the sofa where he’d finally managed to convince the angry orange ball of fluff who’d become his reluctant roommate to occupy the same piece of furniture as him. He glanced to where Hermione sat at their kitchen table: planner, books, and parchments spread out around her. He arched a brow but did not

move. He had no intention of ceding the ground he'd gained with Crookshanks unless he absolutely had to.

"We need to talk."

Ground ceded.

A small surge of chilly anxiety fluttered behind his lungs as he stood, arched brow slipping into worry as he approached the table.

"What about?" he asked as neutrally as he could manage. The chair scraped against wood floors as he pulled it out and took a seat. He wondered if she could see his heart thudding inside his chest from her vantage point. Surely she could, judging by how loud it beat inside his skull, how painful each beat felt against his ribs. Her words—her tone, they rang so ominously, rattling against lovely vaulted ceilings.

"Oh, please don't look at me like that," she said with a fond sort of annoyance in her voice. She rolled her eyes before continuing, "I've just moved in with you. I'm hardly about to announce this isn't working for me."

It made a good deal of sense when she put it like that.

"You're cruel, you realize that, don't you? You had to have known what that phrasing would sound like."

"It sounds like a business meeting."

"In that case, I'm not convinced you've ever been in a business meeting."

"Oh, and you have? And who here is actively employed?"

"Touche, my brutal witch."

She lobbed an unamused look in his direction while fighting off the smile pulling at the corners of her mouth.

"We need to stop working together."

Deja vu struck strangely.

"We—already have? We've had this conversation before. Haven't we?"

She sighed, maintaining her unamused expression. Draco leaned back in his chair, finally relaxing now that he felt assured he wasn't about

to have his heart broken. He stretched an arm across the back of the chair next to him and crossed an ankle over his knee, fully prepared for whatever it was Hermione needed to overthink with him.

“So, have you told your parents you aren’t supervising me anymore? Also, I don’t—well, I don’t want Topsy to have to do it, either. It’s not fair to her.”

“I need *someone* to keep any eye on you in case something hurts you again.”

The twitching smile at the edges of her lips vanished, sinking into something genuinely displeased. “She shouldn’t be ordered to look after me. I’m expected to do my job alone, anyway.”

Draco scoffed, arm falling from the nearby chair as he leaned forward, propping his elbows on the table to control an impulse towards wild gesticulation in order to make his point.

“And what if you’d been alone that day in the guest hall, with the blood curse?”

Just thinking about it made his nostrils flare and jaw clench. She could have *died*.

“I would have used a Patronus to get help, or something. Found the Floo.”

“*Hermione.*”

“I wouldn’t have gotten hurt in the first place if you weren’t there, because I wouldn’t have been so distracted by”—a vague gesture across the table at him—“you doing all your *you* things.”

“Are you—are you *blaming* me for the blood curse?”

“No. I’m not. I just—please don’t order Topsy to watch me.”

“She’s not ordered. She’s asked very nicely.”

“And she’s inclined to say yes. You know that.”

“Well, I can’t help that part, Hermione.”

“You could if you simply didn’t ask her.”

Draco thought about saying something else, but instead clicked his

jaw shut, teeth coming together with an almost painful force. His confidence that he wasn't about to have his heart broken wavered. Did she have to be so fucking stubborn all the time? Didn't she *get it*? Danger stalked her every moment she spent inside that manor. If he wasn't allowed to be there to protect her, or at least facilitate her protecting herself, he'd be damned if he didn't at least have one other set of eyes there to make sure nothing catastrophic happened.

Just the idea of it, the spine-collapsing fear that she might one day encounter something that caught her off guard just enough—just in the right way—for something terrible to happen, curdled the milk in his stomach from that morning's tea.

"Have you told your parents you aren't supervising me anymore?" she asked again, more directly. Damn her.

"Not yet." He tried to hold the grimace at bay. "Meals have been—strange. I'm not really sure what's happening. But they've been oddly agreeable. I think I can ease them into it."

"Into what, the idea that I don't need supervision?" She'd started tapping the cover of her planner in annoyance.

Draco forced himself to take a deep breath before he responded. Things were spiraling, opposing viewpoints brushing past each other instead of coming head to head. They couldn't hash it out if they couldn't see the problem. And he certainly didn't see the problem with being concerned for her wellbeing, or trying not to blow up his parents' already precarious opinion of her by making a wrong turn in a maze of complicated conversations.

"No. Just you. Generally. I'd like to warm them up to the idea of *you*."

Her expression caught, straddling affection and frustration. Draco felt much the same way, trying so hard not to be annoyed with her unending stubbornness, wishing she'd appreciate what he *was* doing. She held too much optimism for the outcome of these conversations she expected him to have. Too much faith that it would all somehow work out.

She blinked. She took a breath. Draco relaxed his posture.

"We have to be at Harry and Ginny's soon," she said.

"We do."

He slid out his chair, only to halt when Hermione spoke again.

“I also wanted to talk about something else.”

What else could she possibly want to layer into this tragedy of a conversation?

He blew out a breath, brow arched, as much of an encouragement to continue as he was willing to give. He watched a muscle flex in her jaw.

“I was thinking,” she said. “Since you already own this place and aren’t paying rent, I can’t exactly split that expense with you—”

“—As if I’d allow that—”

“—Don’t you dare. That’s very unbecoming. I’m planning on paying for all the groceries, at the very least.”

“Planning on it? We’re not going to discuss it?”

“We’re discussing it now.”

“Hermione, I don’t pay for groceries. Topsy stocks the kitchen from the manor.”

The muscle in her jaw flexed again.

“That’s ridiculous.”

“This *conversation* is ridiculous. There’s nothing for you to pay for. I invited you to live with me, not pay me.”

He finished pushing his chair out, standing and ignoring the yowl of protest from Crookshanks, who he hadn’t even noticed had been loitering near his feet.

He glanced at the clock in the living room. “We need to leave.”

Calmly, Hermione gathered her parchments, folded them, and slid them in between her planner’s pages. She didn’t look at him, eyes fixed on the table. She pulled her bottom lip between her teeth and rolled her shoulders backwards.

His chest ached watching her frustration, both at being the cause of it and knowing she’d caused the same for him. He carded a hand through his hair; the urge to have her look at him overtook every

other desire he might have had.

When she did, some of the frustration melted. He watched the same happen in her eyes, tightness loosening at the corners.

She stood. "We'll talk about it more tomorrow."

"Looking forward to it."

She rolled her eyes, fighting a smile. As she stepped around the table, he offered her his arm. She took it. They travelled through the Floo together, disagreement under a stasis charm.

—

It was just that, a disagreement, not a fight. They didn't *fight*; that wasn't who they were. They occasionally disagreed. They bantered and sniped at each other for sport, but they didn't *fight*. Not in earnest. Not since the fight they'd had when Hermione told him they weren't even in a relationship to begin with. And that hadn't been a fight so much as it had been a public execution, an evisceration he'd somehow managed to survive.

As they stepped through the Floo and into Grimmauld Place, arm in arm, they could ignore the little things that weren't all that important in favor of an evening with Hermione's friends.

"We're here," Hermione called.

She squeezed his arm as they stood in Potter's living room, awaiting a greeting.

"Are you nervous?" she asked. "You're a little tense." She squeezed his forearm again for emphasis.

"Nervous? For an intimate dinner with your two childhood best friends? Both of whom were once my mortal enemies? And one of whom has seen you naked? Not at all."

She let her head shift to the side, tilted enough that her temple rested against his upper arm.

"That seems a touch dramatic. Does that mean I was your mortal

enemy, too?”

“Oh, certainly. Perhaps more so.” She looked up at him, bright eyes asking him to elaborate. “I’m not nervous to spend time with them. I’ve just not done it in such an intimate setting before. The risk of an allergic reaction is high.”

“Ginny and Lavender are here, too.” She smirked up at him, a beat, before a smile broke through.

The Weaslette entered the living room with Potter trailing close behind. Hermione engaged in enthusiastic hugs, whereas Draco offered a handshake to Potter and an insult to Ginny about freckle density, which she returned with a similarly acerbic comment about the color of his hair.

He handed off a bottle of firewhisky to Potter, who accepted it with a thanks hardly appropriate for the rarity of the batch. But what did he really expect from Potter, after all?

With a sigh, he followed Hermione and her friends down to the kitchen, lamenting the days he could use Occlumency to avoid this type of socializing. But if Draco wished to stay firmly in *not fighting* territory, Occlumency as a social buffer remained solidly off his list of appropriate coping mechanisms. Hermione hated it. If he admitted it to himself, he hated it, too.

He’d rather suffer through a lucid meal with the likes of Harry Potter and Ronald Weasley if it meant avoiding a massive headache and Hermione’s wrath. He only liked her wrath in small doses, and when it led to a shedding of clothes.

It took all of fifteen minutes for Draco to reconsider that assessment—right around when Weasley brought up the Chudley Cannons’s pre-season starting lineup for the third time, before Draco had even taken a bite of the surprisingly tasteful appetizers the Weaslette provided.

Draco started keeping tally of the Cannons mentions, making eye contact with Ginny halfway through the meal and catching her rolling her eyes as well.

“Do you have a divergent opinion, Weaslette?”

“My brother has no loyalty,” she said in a low voice, picking up her water and taking a huge gulp. Draco felt Hermione still on his right, hovering between engaging with Ron and Lavender at one end of the

table and listening in on Draco's conversation, one he'd just voluntarily engaged in. Potter chuckled across from him.

"Just because you play for the Harpies doesn't mean he's required to root for them," Potter said, flinching almost as soon as the words left his mouth. Draco had the distinct impression the Weaslette had kicked him beneath the table, or sent a stinging hex at him. Either way, Draco failed to contain his snigger as Potter winced.

"That's exactly what it means, and he has no loyalty."

Draco reached for his wine with his left hand, letting his right snake under the table to rest on Hermione's thigh. She still pretended, valiantly, like she had any interest in Ron's excited ramblings about his subpar choice in Quidditch teams. But when her hand found his and squeezed, Draco knew who really held her attention.

—

Draco accepted a cup of tea from Hermione with a smile bordering on a grimace, jaw tight as he forced the expression through. Hermione didn't seem to notice, or at least, didn't comment on it as she settled onto the sofa next to him. He glanced down at his cup and wondered how such a bright, beautiful, exquisite example of a witch and a woman could have survived twenty-four years of life and yet make such a horrendous cup of tea. He knew she understood what a tea strainer was. He'd pointed several of them out to her in their kitchen on a number of occasions.

I thought I'd move the tea strainers here, closer to the mugs.

I bought a new strainer today, I've added it with the others.

Could you hand me a tea strainer, love?

And yet: leaves swirled and swam in his cup. It reminded him of drinking turkish coffee in Sarajevo, a bit sludgy, too much texture; he wanted his liquids *liquid*. Evidently, Hermione didn't have the time or inclination for something as simple as straining her tea.

"You look a little tense again," she said as she leaned into his side, taking a sip of her own tea with no complaints. "I thought dinner went

well. You and Ginny seemed to have a nice conversation about Quidditch.” Her statement had the subtle lilt of a question at the end. He stretched an arm around her shoulder, silently watching as Lavender took a seat in the armchair next to him, with Weasley perching like an unmannered heathen on the coffee table across from her.

He glanced down at Hermione, warm and soft, tucked against his side in perhaps the coziest, most intimate display of affection they’d intentionally allowed in the presence of others. He smirked at her, an effort to offer some comfort.

“The Weaslette has tolerable opinions about Quidditch teams. And a decent skill set in menu setting; the meal was passable.”

Hermione smiled, beaming at him as if he’d just doled out effusive praise and not a moderate expression of tolerance.

Weasley laughed at something Lavender said, leaning back on the table, still sitting so nonchalantly—right in the middle of the room—on a coffee table.

“I don’t think I care for the idea that he’s seen you naked,” Draco whispered as the thought struck him.

Hermione shook from the force of her laughter as she tried to bury the sound against his shoulder. Across the room, Potter arched a brow from behind his stupid spectacles. When Hermione’s giggles abated, she let a hand rest on his thigh, always just a touch too high, a touch too close to the inside of his legs.

“I thought you said you weren’t jealous of him.” She leaned closer, voice quiet as she looked up at him with what he assumed was meant to be an innocent, faultless expression.

She knew exactly what she was doing, fingers flexing against his trousers.

“I’m not. Though by my former logic, I can’t say I’ve fucked you over that table he’s sitting on, which I find irritating.” Her grip on his thigh tightened. She pressed her lips together, scowling as a ruddy bloom erupted across her chest, peeking out of her shirt’s neckline. “I think I rather dislike the idea that I’m not the only man in this room who knows how distractingly beautiful you look naked.”

“I think you’re conflating jealousy with possessiveness. I’m not sure I

find either to be particularly attractive qualities.”

“No?” he asked, dropping his eyes to her grip on his leg. The conversation in the room around them could have stopped and he wasn’t sure either of them would have noticed. He realized quite suddenly that his entire focus had narrowed to the feeling of her pressed up against his torso, hand fisting against his trousers.

“No.”

“You’re sure? You look like you might. You’re flushing a lovely shade of pink.”

She inhaled a deep breath. “Stop making me blush.”

Draco smiled. He’d had his fun. He kissed her temple, intent on relaxing further into the sofa, dutifully sipping his textured tea, and adamantly ignoring any further commentary on the Chudley Cannons. Hermione surprised him when she leaned close to his ear.

“Rationally, no. I think it’s very unbecoming to feel possessive or jealous of a person. But irrationally”—her breath coasted hot across his jaw and to his ear—“I think I’m going to head to the loo. Upstairs. And you should follow me in two minutes.”

Draco’s mouth dropped open as several errant, yet entirely welcome, thoughts barreled through his brain, ultimately landing on the most important: *he fucking loved this witch.*

Harry Potter ruined everything.

Potter cleared his throat. For a wild moment, Draco wondered if they’d been caught being a bit too handsy. But rather, Potter and Weaslette had risen from their sofa across the room and shared a sheepish, nervous sort of look before he cleared his throat again, as if he didn’t already have everyone’s attention.

“We wanted to have you all over for a specific reason, tonight. It was important to us that we tell you in person—” He broke off, hand massaging the back of his neck as his mouth opened and closed soundlessly several times. Weaslette leaned into him with a rather nauseating sort of smile.

In the intervening seconds between Potter’s failure to express himself properly and his wife ultimately taking over, a nervous warmth crept up Draco’s spine: climbing the ladder rungs of his vertebrae towards

his head and into his ears to call him an intruder. He had the distinct sense that he was about to bear witness to something personal, something special—just not to him. Oddly, it flooded him with something that felt a lot like embarrassment.

“I’m pregnant,” Ginny said.

Silence dropped in the blink it took Draco to recognize that he’d been right; he was an intruder on an intimate moment between all these friends. And then the silence exploded with a shriek as Hermione launched herself off the sofa, sloshing her lukewarm tea all over both of them.

And all Draco could say—tone outraged as his eyes locked with Potter’s—was, “You let me insult your pregnant wife?”

—

With the tea spillage quickly *evanesco’d*, and Hermione crying quiet tears of sympathetic joy as she engaged in semi-regular hugging every time she or Potter or Weaslette or Weasley went more than thirty or so seconds without touching, Draco found himself with Lavender Brown as his only company.

He couldn’t reliably remember if he’d ever had a one-on-one conversation with her before. He felt a strange kinship as they both witnessed the intimacy in front of them. Lavender seemed happy enough; Draco felt mostly indifferent. They were both outsiders accidentally present for a staggeringly important moment in someone else’s lives.

“It must be nice to have friends like *that*,” Lavender said, initiating the conversation Draco sensed he wouldn’t be avoiding. Far be it for them to simply sit in silence, adjacent to each other. Conversation needn’t be a requirement.

Draco shrugged. He supposed.

He imagined Theo and Blaise were like that for him, though he couldn’t fathom bursting into tears if either of them decided to burden the world with their progeny. He set his drained cup of tea on the small end table between his sofa and Lavender’s armchair.

She followed the motion, glancing at his cup, then back up at him. She blinked and looked at the tea again. Another blink. Back up to Draco, eyes wider than they'd been before.

"That's interesting," she said, reaching for it.

Oh gods.

Divination. He knew this about her; Hermione had complained on a number of occasions about her distaste for the discipline and her struggles having to listen to Lavender and Parvati drone on and on about it in school.

Draco had two options: engage in a conversation about divination, which admittedly wasn't his favorite subject, either, or continue watching as the golden trio plus one (now two, he supposed) participated in an excessive amount of hugging.

He drummed his fingers against the armrest and took a stabilizing breath.

"What's interesting?"

"There's a lot happening in the leaves." Lavender squinted, holding the cup comically close to her face as she rotated it round and round.

"There'd be a lot less going on if Hermione knew how to use a tea infuser. She makes an uncivilized cup of tea."

Lavender smiled, still staring into the dregs at the bottom of his cup. "It's kind of nice to know she's not perfect at everything, I suppose."

Draco snorted.

"Well. That's about the only thing she can't do, so we have to take our victories when we find them."

Lavender's teeth flashed for a moment as her grin spread wider. "She's not so great at hair smoothing charms, either."

Draco glanced at Hermione, feeling a fond smile break across his face at the sight of the enormous, haphazard bun she'd forced her hair into that day. She didn't often wear it up; she complained it tangled too much and ended up as more hassle than it was worth. And while he generally loved the wild, untamed quality her quagmire of curls presented, he didn't mind the opportunity to admire the line of her

neck.

“It’s twisty,” Lavender said, pulling him back to his mostly-involuntary conversation about divination. “So many paths—but loopy. Shapes that might mean one thing become something else entirely if I turn the cup just so. It’s as if things are changing. Or will change. Have changed? Isn’t the future fascinating?”

Draco’s throat had gone dry, desperate for something to quench his thirst.

“Titillating,” he allowed, as any potential further conversation died in his lungs.

Chapter End Notes

much love to [icepower55](#), [Endless_musings](#), and [persephone_stone](#) for their alpha/beta support!!

and so many thanks to everyone reading! if you didn't happen to peek at the comments for last chapter, I may or may not have posted a tiny little ginny pov snippet because I have zero chill and sometimes I just *vague waving* go wild. thank you to everyone leaving comments and kudos and being the most lovely and enthusiastic folks around! i certainly hope you're still enjoying yourselves! i know i am!!

Chapter 27: -.916, -1.000, -1.083

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

March

tick tock tick tock

Draco had no idea what was happening around him. Intellectually, he knew he sat in the main dining room at his family manor, taking breakfast with his parents as they engaged in occasional conversation about all manner of inconsequential topics, so long as those topics steered clear of Hermione.

Draco, however, couldn't get her off his mind. Between every sip of his tea and every attempt at spreading jam on his toast, he could still hear her breathing, heavy and stuttering, as he'd done everything in his power to delay the inevitability of joining his parents for breakfast.

In an effort to survive what was meant to be a mundane meal, Draco diverted his thoughts from images of his morning with her. He made an attempt to eat, reaching for his fork.

His unbuttoned cuff sidetracked him all over again, hoping his mother wouldn't notice his dressing oversight.

He'd woken that morning with a face full of Hermione's hair, wild curls escaped from her nightly plait and tickling at his cheeks, draped across his neck, invading his lungs with their scent. He rolled from his back to his side, pulling her against him as he buried his face in the cloud of vanilla, amber, and spice that clung to every coil. He found the juncture between her neck and her shoulder with his mouth, planting a kiss through her hair as she made a sleepy sound, stretching against him.

Morning noise always felt intrusive in such quietness. The air felt different, heavier, settled, like a blanket meant to dampen sound as they slept. Draco whispered when he spoke, not wanting to disturb the lovely quiet that morning offered them.

“There’s nothing I want less than to pull myself out of this bed and go meet my parents.”

Hermione attempted a sleep-addled response, arching her back. Under the cover of early sunrise and expensive burgundy sheets, Draco let his arm tighten around her middle, pulling her flush against him as he sampled the skin at her shoulder with his tongue. Slowly, lazily, she managed coherent speech.

“You could stay and have breakfast with me instead?”

She whispered, too. Soft sounds for the soft mattress and silken skin.

Draco groaned quietly against her shoulder blade, loving the suggestion and hating that he couldn’t take it. He lifted his head, slotting his chin behind her ear, conveying his regret with warm breath and wandering fingers across her abdomen.

“I’d have to give them more notice”—the cheeky fucking witch shifted her arse against him—“they don’t handle surprises well. And we’re *almost* making progress.”

Her chuckle broke some of the quiet peace in their room.

“Like the surprise that you aren’t supervising me anymore?” He released a low growl, dragging his teeth in a line down the side of her neck. Her breath caught, stunting her words. “Or that you still have an elf following me everyday?”

Her cajoling wouldn’t work. She knew he was working towards it, that he would tell them, that it required time and delicacy. An early morning lustful haze—with her warm body pulled so close against him that even the slightest motion from his hips shot delicious pleasure coursing through him—was neither the time nor place to rehash such a well-tread disagreement.

Draco inhaled through his nose, against her neck, pressed close to her ear, drowning in her curls. She breathed, too. A slow pull from the still air around them, cautious, as if everything else in the world waited in stasis for what they might do next.

He skated his hand upward, beneath her loose cotton shirt: from soft stomach to sturdy ribs to the swell of her breast. His name slipped from her lips, a quiet whine that rang through the silence with impossible volume, straight through his skull. He had no control over the way his hips responded to that sound, canting forward and

grinding against her.

With the pad of his finger, he trailed a light touch along the curve of her breast, coming to a halt at her nipple. He traced agonizingly light circles around it as he memorized the sound of her breath, hissing on the intake when he finally rolled it between his fingers.

“I have to get ready for work, too,” she said, head thrown back, neck completely exposed as she arched against him and made absolutely no attempt to move.

He rolled his hips against her again, lost in a sort of mindless fog that consisted exclusively of her warm skin and breathless noises, back pressed to his chest. She rocked against him in kind.

He rolled her nipple again, tongue tracing the shell of her ear.

“Did you have to get ready *right now*?” he asked

“You’re the one with the earlier obligation.”

He hummed into her neck, hand dropping from her breast, traveling a familiar path back down her stomach, slipping easily into the front of her knickers. He kissed the corner of her mouth as she twisted towards him, a hand gripping at the back of his thigh.

“I can always make time for you,” he breathed, ripping a whimper from her throat, silence shattered as he slid a finger—then a second—inside her, finding her wet and wanting and ready. She followed her whimper with a gasp. Her hand at the back of his leg flexed, clawing, then vanished.

He had barely a moment to mourn the loss of contact before he realized she’d started shoving her knickers down. His attempt to voice his agreement—a *gods* yes, he wanted to breathe—came out as a broken groan. He buried his face at the back of her neck as he did the same with his pants: inconvenient barriers pushed just far enough away that he could replace his fingers with his cock, driving into her with one deep thrust.

Draco panted, air gusting out of him as the room warmed, space contracting, everything of consequence in his life tangled up in those sheets. He curled his arm beneath Hermione’s shoulder, palming her breast and pinning her in place against him. Even the space required for their lungs to expand and contract created too much distance. He needed her heat, needed to burn, needed her flesh searing him.

She expelled tiny puffs of noise, carried on wisps of air. He could see a flush creeping up her neck, imagined it blooming across her chest. He loved her like this—he loved her every way, but especially like this—rendered mostly incoherent as he had her quick and hard and fast in what little time they had before the real world imposed its will on them.

This brief moment, before he had to face his parents, before she had to face her job, could simply be theirs and theirs alone. A moment of peace and passion crammed between busy schedules and competing priorities. With the sun barely risen, they could hide under their covers and devour every second they had left.

He sucked at the skin on the side of her neck, nearly incoherent himself with every drag and pull inside her, snapping hips and choked groans. She pushed her back against him—an unspoken plea for *more*—chest rising and falling, a frenzy growing as their formerly quiet room filled with pants and *fucks* and whispers of adoration. He worked his fingers in quick, desperate circles around her clit, demanding her pleasure before he gave into his own. White light flashed behind his eyelids as she came around him, a ragged voice repeating his name like an incantation.

He groaned against her, into her, spilling and falling and shattering all at once.

They stilled, breath heavy as the silence blanketed them again.

Draco pressed his lips to her shoulder, her neck, her jaw, the spot behind her ear that forced her to flex against him, drawing another groan from his throat.

“I love you,” he said, so quiet she might have to decipher his words from the feeling of his mouth against her ear. Or perhaps she could simply sense it, a language unique to them, meaning conveyed through touch and the silences between inhales and exhales. He said it again with every breath, every kiss, every trail with his fingers across her skin: *I love you, I love you, I love you.*

She sighed, leaning her shoulders into his chest, limbs melted and lazy. She turned her head and kissed him, offering so much of herself for him to take. “I love you,” she said, miraculously managing emphasis on every syllable as she spoke against his lips.

She sighed again: less sated, this time.

“You have to be at the manor in fifteen minutes.”

Draco opted to ignore such an inconvenience, burrowing into her curls instead. “But you’re much more fun.”

“You’ll tell them soon, right? I’m starting to worry too much time has passed...”

He burrowed deeper into her hair, murmuring an assenting sort of noise as he rocked against her, very seriously considering the logistics of sneaking in a second round before he had to leave.

He didn’t end up crawling out of their bed until five minutes before his parents expected him, which left barely any time for ironing charms and hair-smoothing potions and, evidently, the buttons to his cuffs.

He looked up from his wrist and met his mother’s gaze. Of course she’d noticed his missed button. She probably noticed that slight wave to his hair that day, too. Determined not to draw any more attention to himself, Draco picked up his butter knife and a slice of toast.

His morning with Hermione had been magnificent, the best imaginable way to start his day, perhaps a new routine he could cement in his life: one with far better intimacy than the perfunctory, awkward conversation he forced himself to sit through with his parents.

Hermione couldn’t be a part of this routine, not yet, at least. So she’d made her own, probably scheduled it into her overwrought planner. Fuck Draco’s brain out while he’s still sleep addled and pliable? Check. Nearly make him late for his daily breakfast with his parents, appearance slightly disheveled? Check. Occupy his every waking thought thereafter? Check—ongoing check.

She was a deviant, delicious, wonder of a witch. He smirked, thinking of how she’d react to his assessment that their morning romp had been entirely her doing.

Narcissa’s head tilted, a barely-there movement to convey her curiosity. Treacherously, he wanted her to know—not the explicit details, *gods* no—but he wanted her to know, and accept, and appreciate, the enormous part of his life that Hermione had laid claim to. The part of his life that they steadfastly ignored at every meal together.

Draco drew a deep breath, holding the air at the bottom of his lungs as he steeled himself. He could do this; he *had* to do this. The opportunities he'd been waiting for—seamless, tactful ones—didn't seem to exist. He needed to make his own.

He set down his toast, only half-buttered, with the rest of his uneaten meal.

“Mother. You might have noticed—”

That I've been happier.

That my cuff is unbuttoned.

That I have so much to say, but never do.

But anything he might have said died somewhere beneath his voice box as Tilly appeared with a *crack*, announcing the arrival of a Ministry Representative. Draco swallowed against his pulse, eyes darting to the clock. Hermione had no reason to arrive for another fifteen minutes. Surely she wouldn't waltz in early and announce herself after all the time and effort he'd expended searching for the right way to reintroduce the idea of her to his parents.

Instead, a man walked into the dining room mere seconds after Tilly's announcement. Cheap robes, a generally disgruntled disposition: Lucius's case representative had arrived, interrupting breakfast as he so often did.

Draco couldn't do it again, couldn't stand with his parents as they faced the Ministry, unrepentant, only to have gross unprofessionalism flaunted in their faces. The whole of it made Draco slightly sick to his stomach. He dropped his serviette on his plate and rose quickly, announcing his departure, and left the room before either of his parents could command him otherwise.

—

Blaise had his feet propped up on the edge of the desk, and Draco couldn't bring himself to care. Theo did a fine enough job fighting the good fight for all of them, insisting that Blaise respect their furniture. In Theo's absence, Draco just rolled his eyes, letting Blaise do as he

wished.

“We could try running it out of the flat,” Draco said, reviewing the parchment in front of him. “We wouldn’t necessarily need a dedicated space, and I’d do all the brewing, anyway. If you’re investing some of the startup costs plus advertising, we can negotiate a share in the profits.”

Blaise pulled a cigarette case from his breast pocket and shook it questioningly towards Draco. He declined. “Hermione hates them. Have one if you want; I’ll *scourgify* the room later.”

Blaise pulled a cigarette from the case and lit it. With the tiniest smirk he said, “Theo insists *scourgify* doesn’t get it all out.”

“Well. Theo’s neurotic about cleanliness.”

“And you’re delusional if you think we’re going to have any profits to negotiate if we just buy some potions ingredients, brew some stuff, and take out some advertising space.”

“Is that not how one starts a mail-order potions business?”

Blaise scoffed, agitating Draco, hackles raised.

“What incentive would anyone have to switch from the shops in Diagon to a mail-order service, especially one with *your* name on it? Attracting customers won’t be easy.”

Despite that dour prediction, Blaise looked utterly unconcerned: head tilted back as he took a drag from his cigarette. The slightly ajar office door creaked further open and Draco’s heart dropped, half-expecting Hermione to find Blaise smoking in their flat, despite the fact that it was still the middle of her workday. Crookshanks sauntered in instead.

Blaise blew a ring of smoke across the desk and dropped one of his hands to dangle beside his chair. Infuriatingly, the cat walked right up to Blaise’s hand and pushed his head into his waiting palm.

Draco narrowed his eyes, first at the cat, then at Blaise. “He likes everyone.”

Blaise arched a brow. “Of course he does.”

“Besides, the *incentive* is that they wouldn’t have to go to Diagon Alley at all. A customer can simply mail in an order without having to leave

their home.”

“Apparating takes almost no effort and they can get what they want without having to wait for an owl to deliver.”

Draco scowled, mouth tight. He folded the parchment in front of him in half, then in half again, and again, and again, until he couldn't possibly fold it another time. Only then, did he speak.

“Why are you trying to talk me out of our business plan? Are you backing out?”

Draco nearly leapt across the desk and throttled his almost-maybe-former-friend when Blaise rolled his eyes.

“Of course not. These are smart things to consider when starting a business—”

The door creaked again—this time with force—and Hermione burst across the threshold. Crookshanks scampered, slipping under a gap in the front of Draco's desk and winding himself between his feet. Considering the look on Hermione's face, Draco probably shouldn't have spared a moment to feel pleased that the cat ran to him.

And that look? On Hermione's face?

Fury.

“You didn't tell them.”

Distinctly worded and spoken as a statement, not a question. She had her hands on her hips, standing in the doorway. Blaise hadn't moved from his reclined position, but looked moderately alarmed, even by his standards.

He dropped his feet from the desk and stood.

Draco shook his head, holding up a finger to halt Blaise's imminent departure.

“I might need a witness.”

He'd not seen this temperature-shifting, heart-stopping sort of fury from Hermione since they still used each other's surnames—honestly, probably not since the time she'd slapped him.

“Yes, you might need a witness, Draco Malfoy. *You didn't tell them.*”

He couldn't quite decide if the flush crawling up her neck and the clear effort she made not to stomp her foot made her anger adorable or all that much more terrifying. Considering the impressive magic he knew her to be capable of, he settled on terrifying.

"Our breakfast got interrupted this morning," he said, standing from his own seat, gaze volleying between Hermione, to convey his contrition, and Blaise, to convey that he was under no circumstances allowed to leave him alone with such a furious woman. "You were right, there's never going to be a perfect time. I'll tell them tomorrow, I promise."

He tried to sound reasonable; he *was* reasonable. This could be a *reasonable* conversation. He'd spent too long looking for the right opening, he knew that, but that didn't mean he hadn't tried, didn't mean it. She had to know that.

Her laugh echoed in his eardrums, sharp and quick and entirely unsettling. Blaise took a step towards the door, but she stood in his path and didn't even seem to notice him.

"Oh, there's no point telling them now, Draco. They know."

"They know?"

His body betrayed him, a *bombarda's* worth of anxiety battering his ribs. He shouldn't have cared that much, been so afraid for the implications.

Blaise inched closer to the doorway, a lean in his posture as he seemed to consider the space required to simply slip by without interrupting.

"I've been decommissioning your parents' wing for the last week. They're supposed to stay away but—well, I ran into your mother."

Draco swallowed, wishing his brain hadn't turned to slush inside his skull, incapable of complex thought and coherent speech.

Hermione continued, blowing out an angry breath. Worse than the anger, though; he could see the disappointment, almost glassy, in her eyes. "She seemed very confused that you weren't around. It was"—she faltered, lifting and dropping her hands as if to say *she didn't know*—"difficult to explain why Topsy was there. So I, well—I explained that we'd decided we needed more clear lines between home and work since we moved in together. You can imagine how well *that*

went over.”

Hermione finally seemed to notice Blaise standing near her, methodically checking each and every one of his pockets, steadfastly refusing to look at either of them.

“And what did she—my mother—what did she say?” Draco cleared his throat. He felt ridiculous, suddenly, upon realizing he still stood behind his desk. He took a step around it, towards her, but froze when Hermione lifted a hand to tell him to stop.

“*Draco.*” He’d never hated his name as much as he did just then, when spoken with such venom, such disappointment, such fury, from such a lovely, lovely mouth. “You didn’t tell them we’ve been living together.” Some of her anger seemed to bleed from her pores, exhaustion taking up residence.

He opened his mouth, closed it again, opened, failed to speak.

“I thought they knew that part,” she said, quieter. “I assumed they did when you said you told them we were together over Christmas.”

“I hadn’t asked you to move in yet. So I didn’t—that part didn’t come up.”

“Or in the three months since.”

The space between his desk and the door, between the two of them, grew wider, deeper than he’d ever seen it. He couldn’t bear it, and in two deep strides, he stood in front of her. As much as he wanted to reach out and touch her, to wind a curl around his fingers or trace constellations between her freckles, he settled for proximity.

“I’d wondered why you were having *such* a hard time bringing up the fact that you haven’t been supervising me anymore,” she said. It looked like she was staring at one of his shirt buttons, just beneath his collar. “But now it makes more sense. You hadn’t told them the bigger thing.”

The worst part, the feeling that settled so sickeningly in his stomach, was that he hadn’t even been aware of that particular fault. He’d been so singularly focused on the issue of his supervision that he’d accepted the omission about their living situation as a sort of given. And all this time, she’d thought they knew.

“I don’t know what to say,” he admitted, hating how raw his voice

sounded. “I was trying to find the right time.”

Blaise made a relieved noise just beyond Hermione’s shoulder as he pulled a key from the interior breast pocket of his overcoat. The next moment, the air pressure in the room shifted, a tiny gust of wind swirling around where Blaise had been standing a moment before.

“Ah,” Draco said. “That’ll be one of Theo’s portkeys.”

Hermione narrowed her eyes at the space where Blaise had just been, confusion and wonder etched in her features. She shook her head, casting off the distraction as she turned back to Draco.

Her anger seemed to redouble, a flush creeping up her neck again, and not the kind of flush he preferred to see on her.

“Were you ever going to tell them?”

His stomach turned. That felt unfair, uncalled for, a jinx she knew would land with force.

“Is that really a question you’re asking me? Of course. I told you I would. I promised I would.”

Maybe it was simply a delayed reaction to being shouted at—or what a Gryffindor might call righteous indignation, or a defense mechanism—but proper anger exploded from his chest. “I told you this was real, it’s *always* been real for me. And I told them about you, didn’t I? But not everything has to comply with your timelines, Hermione. It can’t all end up on a schedule.” He shoved a hand in his pocket, desperate that she not notice how hard it shook. “I can’t just—brute force telling my parents something like that. It just—it takes time, finesse.”

“And I have no finesse?”

“Generally speaking? No, not really. And I love that about you.” He couldn’t bear the tiny step she took away from him, the drop in her features, the war that anger fought with distress across her face. “I do. You’re an open book and I never have to question your motives. I trust you. Do you have any idea what a relief that is?”

His anger bled out quickly, tapped straight from the vein. Her face softened as they stood so close, yet so far apart.

“No other part of my life is like that, Hermione. They’re not like you. But I promise, I *am* trying. Even if I’m doing a poor job of it.”

Her hands finally fell from her hips, limp against her sides.

“Well”—a breath—“now they know.”

They stood in silence just long enough for the rest of Draco’s annoyance, formerly pure anger, to mix with his guilt, his sense of failure, his disappointment at having disappointed her. Finally, Hermione released a tight breath, eyes, mouth, and brows all turned down as she processed everything they’d just said—too much, if Draco had to make an assessment. She gave him space, asking for her own, muttering something about finding a book to read.

Draco holed up in his office for the next two hours, trying and failing to review the business plan that Blaise had so thoroughly skewered before Hermione’s interruption. It wasn’t that it was a bad plan; Draco knew that, but Blaise seemed insistent on pointing out every last potential flaw, every point where they could fail. He needled away at Draco’s attempted optimism, deflating him with every word. Strategy looked a lot like pessimism under a different name. As much as Draco appreciated Blaise’s business acumen, sometimes he needed his friend, not his potential business partner.

He shoved several parchments, cluttered with ingredient and potions lists, into his desk drawer and stood. The sun had started to set, suffusing his office with a warm orange glow that—if Draco allowed himself the wandering thoughts—reminded him strangely of his time with Hermione at the manor: the glow of yellow, orange, red, and purple light coloring so many of his memories with her.

He stood and drew the curtains closed.

He found her in the living room, darkened east-facing windows already void of light. He’d missed sunset with her; he didn’t have many opportunities to share them. Missing this one felt heavy, weighted against him.

She sat on the green velvet sofa, eternally her pick if given the choice. It was a silly, stubborn habit: her insistence on loving the thing, staking her claim to it, even with its unsavory past as a Malfoy family heirloom. Crookshanks slept in a tightly-wound ball beside her as she

sat cross-legged, book open in her lap.

“I owed my parents earlier,” Draco said as a way to announce his presence in the room. He leaned against the wall, just barely free of the corridor. “I told them I wouldn’t be at dinner this evening.”

Hermione looked up from her book, expression neutral, body still.

“Don’t they require more notice than that?” If Draco didn’t know any better, he might wonder if she’d learned Occlumency despite her personal dislike for that particular brand of magic. Her words came out even, non-accusatory, but they stung all the same.

“I think of all days, the short notice tonight was probably expected.”

Her cheeks twitched, a forced smile and an attempt at acknowledging the discomfort between them.

“Can I take you out?” he asked. “Is there a film you want to see?”

“You hate movies.”

“Well, I want to apologize. I want you to be happy.”

“They make you sick.”

“I don’t have to watch it. I’m plenty entertained watching you.”

“We don’t have to stay in muggle London all the time. Your parents have known about me”—a pause as she cleared her throat—“to at least some extent for a while now. We could spend time together in the magical world, you know.”

“Yes. Of course, wherever you want to go.”

A fearful, intrusive thought wondered if she thought he meant to hide her. It certainly looked like it, if he thought about it like that. He’d dragged his feet finding a way to tell his parents the extent of their relationship and the lines they’d drawn for themselves. He took her on dates almost exclusively in muggle London, but only because that was where they’d started, where they spent so long. It was easy, simple. It didn’t come with judgmental stares and impolite implications about him using Unforgivables on the fabulous, ineffable Hermione Granger.

She closed her book.

He hated fighting, didn’t know *how* to do it. But this was very clearly

a fight, not a disagreement. His chest ached. A desperate desire to convince her how much she meant to him tore through his bones, cracking him to bits. He was *trying*. Always trying. Usually failing. But trying nevertheless. He needed her to try, too. They could do this.

He arched a brow at her, an offering in familiar expressions, a tone they knew how to navigate.

“Which book is that?” he asked, seeking safety in old conversations.

“Einstein. I’ve been on it for ages.” She set the book aside and gave Crookshanks one long stroke from the back of his ears and along the length of his spine, a spiraled motion. “Magic has rotted my brain a bit; I’m struggling with all the muggle science. This isn’t an abridged version.”

Draco made a thoughtful noise, crossing one ankle over the other as he leaned against the wall, transfixed by her beautiful face in the most inopportune of moments.

“I wonder why that little bookstore of yours would stock something like that.”

The fact that she chuckled nearly crushed him with relief. He’d never known the sound of a person’s laugh could be so intimately tied to his lungs, his heart, his soul.

“Ha-ha, you’re very funny,” she said with a roll of her eyes. “But if you’ll recall, they had this one stocked the first time we were there, before all your meddling.”

“Meddling? What meddling? Regardless, I don’t recall. I was rather distracted by a beguiling little witch.”

The whole conversation felt like a two-way apology in many, many more words. A roundabout way of meeting each other in the middle after making several painful stops along the way. There was hope in that though, meeting in the middle. He didn’t have to prostrate himself, stretch to meet her at one end, and he wouldn’t ask that of her, either. What he had with her was too warm, too comforting, too wonderful to resist finding equilibrium as soon as possible when thrown off balance.

That desire to find peace didn’t ease all his worry though, couldn’t melt all the tension in his shoulders. He saw the same in hers as well.

Hermione sighed, still scratching Crookshanks behind his ears.

“What if we tried to get along?” she asked, eyes fixed on her cat.

Draco remained against the wall, watching her, cautious, seeking calm waters in a choppy sea.

“Get along?”

“With your parents. We could—I don’t know. We could have a dinner or something? Try to be civil?”

She looked up at him, brows drawn tightly together as the grandfather clock in the corner of the room ticked the seconds between her ask and his answer. She continued instead.

“I just—Draco. I feel like we’re—well, we’re kind of stuck together, all of us. Aren’t we?”

His arms, which had been folded across his chest in what was probably too obvious a defensive posture—literally holding himself together as he held his breath, searching for the right things to say if such words even existed—dropped, falling to his sides.

He grew warm, a trickle of adrenaline coating his veins as an overwhelming fondness crashed over him, dunking him beneath the surface. Choppy sea, roiling waves, battered shores. He dragged himself to land and found her there, suggesting with such pure, delightful innocence that they were *stuck* together. As if there was anything else he’d rather be.

He heard her breath catch in her throat as she inhaled; she had to have seen the shift in his posture. He wasn’t sure he’d ever wanted her more than he did in that otherwise inconsequential moment. But the gall of her, the unadulterated audacity of her implication. It lit his marrow on fire.

“Come here,” he said, finding his voice very low, very quiet, very serious—somewhere between a request and an imperative.

Quietly, carefully, she stood. She stopped in front of him, and Draco couldn’t help himself, hands winding through her hair, twisted up in her curls, cradling her skull as he bent his head, forehead resting against hers.

“We are very, *very* much stuck with each other.” Her hands came to

rest at his belt, fingers hooked through the loops as they stood close enough that he could feel the heat radiating off of her skin, the warmth of a star just for him.

“In fact,” he continued, utterly lost to the intoxication of having her so close. He could count her freckles and catalogue the colors in her eyes: every earth tone imaginable. “I’d dare say I’m beholden to you, indentured, a servant to your every whim so long as you will have me.” He leaned closer, lips finding hers and feeling of home.

It didn’t answer her question. It didn’t address whether or not they could all find a way to coexist in a peaceful, productive way. But it laid bare his values, the most important of them.

“I don’t want to go to a movie,” she said, breathing her words into him. *I don’t want to fight*, is what she meant. He knew, because he could read between her lines. He’d studied her face and her words and every last bit of her that she allowed him to learn. He knew what she meant to say and what she said were two very different things. And he heard both.

“I don’t want to, either.”

It responded to both her sentiments, meeting in the middle.

Chapter End Notes

so many thanks to my alpha/beta team for their tremendous support and feedback, as always! [icepower55](#), [Endless_musings](#), and [persephone_stone](#) are superstars, in case you didn't know!

and thank YOU so much for reading! I hope you enjoyed this chapter! and keep an eye out later tonight for a lil spooky something I'll be posting too! (and by lil, I mean 13k words woaaaaoops). <3 <3

Chapter 28: -.833, -.916, -1.000

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

April

tick tock tick tock

The poached eggs, cultured butters, and sugar-crusted pastries didn't taste quite the same. They no longer offered the same richness, the same sense of familiarity, of routine, that they once had. They'd started tasting stale, boring: a repetition of the things he'd eaten his whole life, day in and day out. Made with too much butter, too much fat, too much excess emulsified into every last sauce and spread and sausage offered as a feast on a table only serving three.

Topsy and Tilly *cracked* in and out of the dining room, dropping off more platters and trays of fruits and pastries and eggs than his family could possibly consume in a week, let alone a single meal. His parents barely seemed to notice, hardly even blinking an eye at the sharp sound each time an elf *cracked* into the room with them. Once Draco noticed it, realized just how often the elves came and went, tending to their juice glasses, tea temperatures, and errant crumbs, he couldn't tear his eyes and ears from the intrusion they caused, the unending labor they provided. Hermione had wholly and truly invaded his brain, carved sympathy for these creatures that his parents barely even noticed.

He frowned at his porridge. He didn't *want* to have this taken away from him, too. He'd lost his beliefs, his enchantment with his family home, could he not at least keep an innocent companionship with the elves? They weren't even bound to the grounds anymore; they stayed of their own free will, however much of it they had left.

Everything about this routine meal with his parents felt excessively complicated, overly traditional and steeped in elf magic: anachronistic in every sense.

He stared into his porridge.

They still hadn't talked about her. Hadn't so much as broached the

subject. It had started driving him a little mad. Their first meal together after Hermione informed him of her run-in with Narcissa had been a test, an experiment to determine how far they were willing to stretch their adamant insistence that she simply didn't exist. Each day since—five of them now—had become another of several heavy, hard hammered nails in coffins containing his hope for them.

His mother said something about having taken tea with Sakura Parkinson the day before. Narcissa's shoulders, arms, wrists, and fingers all moved in a stiff, unnatural way as she spoke, pointedly making eye contact with Draco, forcing dialogue. The one-way conversation stalled, then swelled again when she mentioned another friend, someone whose name he couldn't bring himself to retain.

Panic surged when she mentioned her friend's daughter, who had made an inquiry after him.

"Isn't that lovely, Draco? A fine, pureblood witch who'd be amenable to your courtship? I've invited her to tea next week; I was hoping you might make room in your schedule for an additional visit with us."

Pinpricks raced up Draco's spine. A rush of cold immediately followed by a flare of heat: anger in sensation, if not name.

"Excuse me?"

His mother blinked, fork paused halfway between her plate and her mouth. She tilted her head just enough to convey she hadn't expected his tone.

He hadn't expected it either, but the bite ripped through his throat with a force he had no intention of controlling.

"Tea, next week," she repeated, placing her fork back down on her plate. At the head of the table, Draco heard his father fold and place his copy of the *Prophet* aside.

"Are you mad?"

"What do you mean, darling?"

Her question sounded so innocent, so uninformed, as if she had no idea what she was doing. But her eyes hardened to sapphires, solidified by a desperation to withstand whatever he intended to put her through.

More than that, she silently begged. He could see it in the twitch at the corner of her mouth, in the tension settling around her eyes, in the way her palms had flattened against the tablecloth.

“I’m not having tea with your friend’s *unattached* daughter.”

“She’s training to be a healer. Very intelligent. And their family isn’t so appalled by the Malfoy name—they’re open to the idea of you as a suitable match—”

“—Mother—”

“—She’s bright, lovely, and I’m told she plays the piano just beautifully—”

“—Mother—”

“—And I’d dare say we aren’t exactly in a position to decline such a potentially advantageous—”

“—I am. In a position to decline. Because I’m living with my girlfriend.”

Tilly *cracked* into the room with such startling force that unwarranted images of splinchings flitted through Draco’s brain. Even Narcissa recoiled at the sound. Tilly placed a tray of croissants in the center of the table and disappeared again.

Everything seemed to collapse: the mood in the room, his mother’s face, the sham Draco had been calling optimism.

The strange dream-like quality of their breakfasts shifted, warped into something closer to a nightmare.

Slowly, Narcissa pushed her plate away. Barely an inch, but enough to signal her distaste, the souring of her appetite. The hurt hidden in her gaze hit significantly harder than the anger and the frustration simmering beneath it. Narcissa wore her disappointment, anger, betrayal, and sadness like diamonds: precious, multifaceted stones with several hard edges. Beautiful, but unyielding.

“As this is the first I’m hearing of this from you, *my son*, you can imagine my surprise.”

“You aren’t surprised, Mother. I know you spoke to Hermione last week. And it isn’t as if I didn’t tell you about her at Christmas. You’ve

just been doing this”—a broken, pleading sort of gesture at the buffet between them—“whatever *this* is.”

“You will not speak to your mother in that tone.”

Draco’s attention snapped to the head of the table, where Lucius had issued his command. For the first time in several meals spent together, Draco looked his father in the eye, matching grey for grey, each as unyielding as galvanized steel.

Draco set his jaw. Excluding how horrible it all was, he found something distinctly surreal in the avoidant extremes his parents engaged in to pretend his decisions didn’t exist—at least, not the ones they disagreed with.

“What tone?” He volleyed his dissent right back at his father, not quite a backhand, but with enough force to move the ball back in Lucius’s court. “One that asks her to respect my relationship?”

“Relationship?” Lucius’s tone cut Draco down in an instant. They weren’t playing a game, volleying points back and forth to come to an understanding. Lucius had issued an edict, and he expected Draco’s compliance. No conversation. No disagreement. And certainly no resistance. “It is one thing to—exercise a bit of distasteful rebellion. But to invite her into your home, Draco? It’s unseemly. It will damage your reputation if it gets out.”

Draco’s spine met the back of his chair, every muscle in his torso painfully tensed by a fresh crest of anger, carrying with it disbelief. Waves of disappointment lashed at his nerve endings, as if his skin had been hit by an *ennervate*, suddenly awake and aware and prickling with recognition that this situation had no clean exit, no finesse-able escape.

“Gets out? Father, it’s not a secret. We had a fucking housewarming party. Anyone who isn’t a hermit”—a quick, flippant gesture towards Lucius—“self-imposed or otherwise, knows.”

“That’s enough.” Lucius’s cane came down on the table with a sharp crack. For a moment, Draco wondered if the force had split the wood open, either in the cane or the table. But both seemed reasonably intact when Lucius lifted the cane again.

Malfoy Manor didn’t contain nearly enough tapestries to dampen the echo that rattled around the dining room: that sharp crack repeating and repeating and *repeating* until it was all Draco could hear, ringing

in his ears.

“I have warned you,” Lucius said. “We have warned you. You are making a mockery of this family and it will not be tolerated any longer. I will tell you this only once: end this dalliance, now.”

The wild thumping of Draco’s heart supplanted the ringing in his ears. His chest physically ached, seized and clenched and ready for a fight. Gods, he felt like he’d just dueled for his life and barely anything had happened at all, apart from the absolutely impossible order his father had just made.

Draco couldn’t decide if it helped or hurt that Lucius looked equally as pained. Redness climbed up his neck, jaw ground together with such force that Draco could practically hear his teeth groan in protest.

He didn’t necessarily consider his next move. He employed no caution as he forced his chair away from the table and left the room: hands shaking, heart aching, head pounding.

—

Draco managed to ignore the footsteps echoing behind him right up until he opened the parlor doors, momentum delayed long enough for Narcissa to catch up to him.

“Draco, darling—”

He didn’t look back—wasn’t sure if he could, honestly—with his spine held so ramrod straight by tension that refused to release its grip on him. She called to him again as he reached for the Floo powder.

“Draco, please. Darling, I do not dignify begging but—I am asking, son.”

Son. But what kind of son? One she could be proud of? One who’d disappointed her? One who’d tried? One who’d failed? One who’d finally attempted to be his own person, and in doing so had somehow missed the mark on becoming who his parents wanted him to be?

The anger that had carried him from dining room to Floo parlor sank into disappointment, weariness. He turned to face her, and as he

released a breath, his chest finally unclenched. That type of anger simply wasn't sustainable, lest he wish for it to turn him to stone like Lucius.

"And what, exactly, are you asking?"

Narcissa's lips thinned as she considered her words, almost as if she hadn't expected to elaborate.

"Please, Draco. Consider the long-term, the generational consequences of what you're doing. The longer you entertain this, the longer you let this endeavor continue, the more painful it will be for both of you when it must end. I don't relish the idea of seeing you in pain."

Draco had never known Narcissa to look uncomfortable in her own home. Normally, she captivated every room she occupied, a star around which expensive decor and grand architecture orbited as supporting players in her elegant game. Seeing her standing in front of him, with her arms hanging loose at her sides and genuine concern bleeding from her features, forced a sense of fallibility to the surface. He wasn't used to thinking of his mother as anything less than perfectly composed.

"Why must it end, Mother?" he asked quietly, needing to, but not wanting to wear her down any further. For as furious as she'd made him—she *and* Lucius—she was still his mother. And he, too, did not relish the idea of seeing her in pain. "Perhaps we will all be stuck with each other for a very long time. You and Father should find a way to accept that."

"Draco." She sighed. She closed the distance between them by half, trying. "I know such things don't register in the mind of a young man who is"—he watched her swallow, struggle against her choice of words—"in love for the first time. It is a consuming feeling, and I sympathize. But when the time comes for children—to sire an heir—Draco, you carry two pureblood lineages in your veins. That—you can't simply throw that away."

She reached up and smoothed a hand over her already perfect, silken hair. "I realize it's not ideal," she continued. "Not especially with times—with times as they are."

She stopped again. Draco had the sudden sense that he was witnessing a breakdown of her understanding of the world, and of her place in it. That same kind of breakdown that ripped his thoughts, heart, and conscience to shreds while he toiled away under house arrest,

studying for NEWTs and a future potions mastery in an attempt to drown out the overwhelming hypocrisy inside his own head.

She straddled a line—a crevasse—too wide for her petite frame to bridge. She wasn't built for it, raised for it, trained for it. Draco, though, he'd fallen to the bottom of it, sinking on one side before he climbed his way up the other. His mother was too battered to make such a journey. Too war-worn. And she looked heartbroken, like maybe she could see the other side, or at the very least imagine it, but knew of no other path than the one she already walked. So she clung to it with everything she had, because it was, in fact, everything she had.

Draco realized that somewhere, somehow, their roles had been reversed. Perhaps by the war or by the rebuilding that came after. He used to look to her for comfort. Now though, he realized how badly she needed comfort from him.

She must have felt it, too, his slipping away. He didn't know how to give her the comfort she needed. He could not and would not lie or omit to spare her feelings; he'd already done too much of that to Hermione.

When had she gotten so small? Objectively, he knew he'd surpassed his mother's height somewhere in his fifth year. But here, now, as he stepped forward to envelope her in a hug, she felt distinctly delicate and frail against him.

Narcissa smelled like flowers every day of the week, a different perfume for each day, probably enough to fill an entire month with a garden's worth of floral notes. Today it was gardenias; he hadn't smelled that particular one on her for years. It reminded him of being a teenager, of different, younger times.

Was this what growing up felt like? Was this the moment that made him an adult? A man in his own life: comforting his mother instead of the other way around? The last time he'd truly hugged his mother had been after his release from Azkaban. She had offered him comfort, warmth, and stability after two months spent locked away, alone in a cell in the middle of an ocean. Her hug had felt like a promise that he would be alright.

He couldn't help but feel like he'd already failed to offer her the same comfort. Would everything be alright? He didn't know.

He spoke into her hair: "I'm not changing my mind."

She stiffened, but did not break from the hug, not for several more beats of her heart against his torso, out of sync with his own. When she finally pulled away, she looked around the parlor thoughtfully, brows drawn together, wandering gaze looking for—something.

“It’s different in here,” she said after a moment. “Nicer.”

Draco knew exactly why: Hermione Granger. She had left her mark in many, many places.

“Where has your grandfather’s sofa gone?”

—

Draco took a deep breath upon returning to his flat. He needed new air in his lungs, a different atmosphere. A blur of orange flashed in his periphery. Draco turned in time to see Crookshanks bolt into the kitchen. He followed, rolling his eyes as the cat stopped, turned once, and then sat with a theatrical tail swish in front of his food bowl.

“This is our Saturday routine, is it?”

Draco pulled Crookshanks’s food from the cabinet and filled his bowl. He had no problem feeding the cat every Saturday morning if it meant Hermione got even a minute more sleep. She never indulged, rarely slept in, except on Saturdays, a strange twisting of *his* former day into a time for her to relax, unwind.

From the distinct lack of a human greeting, he suspected she still slept soundly. He glanced at the clock over the sink: barely half eight. His breakfast had been cut terribly short by—well, by all of it, by everything.

He left Crookshanks to enjoy his breakfast—one of them should, after all—and walked to the bedroom. She could have as much of Saturday for her relaxation as she wanted. He’d managed to finagle every other day of the week for himself. Suspiciously, her evenings had more time these days, too. She’d decreased the number of hours she spent at the manor into something resembling a normal work schedule.

She didn’t seem to appreciate his implication that the only reason she’d worked so late in the past had been because of him. She’d flush

a little bit pink, too.

He paused at the threshold to their bedroom. The creep of sunrise trickled through partly-drawn curtains on the east facing windows, casting a soft lemony glow about the space. She'd invaded the room so fully he couldn't help but marvel at the touches of red and gold warming his cool Slytherin sensibilities. The room felt still, preserved, a place out of step with time and space. Burgundy sheets, a bedside lamp with a gold base, a perpetually unused cat bed near the dresser with a Gryffindor crest embroidered on it. He'd take the admission to his grave, but here, in this stillness, this unrealness, he could admit he enjoyed the warmth of it: the warmth it brought him. He never could have imagined such a thing before she'd invaded far more than his home.

Toe to heel, he popped one of his dragonhide shoes off, discarding it by the door. He shifted his weight, toe to heel again, and kicked off the other.

Hermione released a deep, sleepy breath from the bed across from him. She looked entirely otherworldly: curls splayed away from her face where they escaped her plait, one arm tucked under her pillow as she lay on her side. The covers had slipped to her hip; she'd probably thrown them down in a particularly vicious readjustment. She ran hot when she slept and was prone to heavy tossing and turning; a less-than-ideal sleeping companion, truth be told. He didn't mind in the slightest.

He'd never seen anything more beautiful.

His father couldn't possibly understand what he demanded.

His mother mustn't know what she asked.

Draco sighed: contented, happy.

He popped the link out from his french cuffs.

Cuff links, for a breakfast on a weekend. He wondered what a breakfast routine with Hermione would look like. He imagined a much more relaxed dress code. His heart pushed against his ribs, yearning for something that simple.

He popped out the other cuff link and dropped them atop the dresser. He began unbuttoning his shirt, pausing halfway down his chest. She shifted, stirred.

Draco approached the bed. She wasn't fully awake yet, but her face lacked the total serenity it usually had when she slept, which meant the day's obligations had started making themselves known in the early morning fog inside her brain. He pulled himself onto the bed, up on his hands and knees, crawling over her.

She shifted again, eyes blinking open. Her hands found his chest as he propped himself up on one elbow. With his free hand, he wrangled her mass of freshly slept hair away from her face.

"Hi," he said.

She smiled, tired and slow, but glowing like nothing else. An entire fucking star's worth of light in his bedroom, spilling from her smile.

"Hi." She carded a hand through his hair, sending waves of relaxation rolling down his spine. "How did it go?"

He knew what she meant. She'd asked the same thing at least once a week for months now. For the first time, he could tell her, a small seedling of pride prepared to bloom in his chest.

"They've heard it from me. Definitely."

Her hands fell from his hair and his chest; she blinked several times. Surprise registered in the camera shutter technique her eyes had adopted, perhaps an attempt to memorize the moment. She rolled fully to her back, hands finding him again.

Her shock melted into a smile, an even brighter star than before.

"What did they say?"

He couldn't dim her happiness, not now. He'd told them. That they'd reacted as poorly as expected, despite his hoping otherwise, needn't ruin the day.

Draco released some of his weight from his elbow, settling more fully atop her, one leg slotted between her thighs. He knew her reaction was probably entirely reflexive, but that didn't stop his smirk as she rocked against him, just enough that he couldn't deny the motion had happened. He dropped his head to hers, nearly forehead to forehead. She flushed, just as he'd hoped. She bit her lip, arched her spine, pressed against him.

"It could have gone worse," he told her.

And that was his crime, always his crime. A lie by omission.

It could have been worse, so much worse. He could have been cursed, kicked out, disowned. But it also could have gone substantially better.

She seemed to have lost interest in her question anyway, hands finishing his remaining buttons, slipping beneath his shirt to find skin. She pushed the fabric from his shoulders. He shifted his weight, from one arm to the other, freeing himself of the shirt.

Her hands found his belt at the same time he lowered his lips to her neck, tracing the long line of her throat with his tongue.

Leather slipped through belt loops.

Air escaped lungs in panted whooshes.

Bodies pushed and pulled: desperate for contact, friction, *more*.

She arched her back again, more intentionally this time, core grinding down against his thigh as a tiny, broken noise found its way to the surface, traveling from somewhere deep inside her lungs to the very tip of her tongue.

She trailed her hands down his chest, and he did the same to her. Lazily, his forefinger found her bottom lip, pressing with just enough pressure to pop it free from where she'd trapped it between her teeth. He descended, over the delicate point of her chin, the underside of her jaw, following the same path down her throat that his tongue had just travelled. He paused at the hollow between her collarbones, nestled at the base of her neck. Flushes of red and pink, blood shooting to the surface of her skin, spotted her chest.

She inhaled; his palm rose with her breast bone.

He descended again, lazy fingers appreciating every inch of satiny skin he came in contact with, memorizing every pink flush and drawn out shiver.

His finger caught on the neckline of the cotton camisole she'd slept in. He pulled it taught, drawing a line between her breasts, stretching the thin straps as he forced the neckline into a vee shape. She'd stopped her own ministrations, hands falling limp at her sides in a boneless, breathless sort of way. Her chest had stilled, and Draco knew without looking that she held her breath. If he did look, he knew he'd find her eyes trained on him, daring him to make another move, desperate to

know what it would be.

But Draco had already lost himself entirely to the sight of her newly exposed skin as he pulled her camisole down. He slid his finger to the side, pulling the fabric taut beneath her right breast, exposing it to their warm, Saturday morning bedroom.

She finally drew a breath, rattling through the room, echoing through his skull.

If he loved her enough, earned enough love in return, wouldn't that suffice?

Couldn't it negate everything else that said *no*, they couldn't have this? When it was just him, and her, and their tacky burgundy sheets, it certainly felt like it was enough.

He kissed the skin above her breast, where a purpling, mottled scar used to live, erased by the potion he'd made for her. Her hands moved again, tracing lines across his chest and torso where his own scars once thrived. This had to be enough. It had already done so much *good*.

"I told my mother we're stuck together, as you said. Stuck for a very long time."

He spoke directly into her pores, lips to skin.

"How long?" The question rode on a quiet gust of air, barely breathed into existence as he kissed his way down her chest.

"As long as you'll have me."

She hissed when he rolled his tongue around her nipple, hands grabbing at his shoulders, either to push him away or pull him closer, depending on the torture she preferred. He could hear the whining, pleading tone strangling her voice when she spoke.

"That's—that's a very long time."

That kind of confirmation, that she might want him as long as he wanted her, ignited a warm glow in the center of his chest. Relief and awe and wonder made a home behind his ribs.

"The rest of my life, hopefully."

He said the brave, bold words quietly, still nuzzled against her skin as

he touched and teased and tried his best to show her what it might look like. He'd been unbound from just one day of the week, but could he be greedy? Could he steal whole years for himself? A lifetime?

She responded with a moan. Her fingers dug painfully in his shoulders. If he could, he'd steal several lifetimes for himself, too. Eternities.

Chapter End Notes

so much alpha/beta love to my darlings [icepower55](#), [Endless_musings](#), and [persephone_stone](#).

thank you everyone so much for continuing to read this story and interact with me! i love hearing from you so, so much! i hope you're still enjoying yourselves! thank you for reading!!!

Chapter 29: -.750, -.833, -.916

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

May

tick tock tick tock

Draco tried his best to ignore the stares. *They could be worse*, he told himself. Theo seemed resigned. Hermione, entirely unfazed.

With six years separating them from the war, and four from his house arrest, the frequency of suspicious or hateful looks sent his way had decreased, just as his skill at ignoring them grew from practice.

However, Draco always felt more visible than usual with Theo at his side, and even more so with Hermione. Though, she'd disappeared somewhere in the antique shop as she monopolized the shopkeeper's time with an unending stream of questions about the history of each piece she found even remotely interesting.

Theo hadn't spoken for several minutes, bent over a box of antique keys, pulling what felt like every last one out for a careful, obsessive evaluation before it either went back into the box or earned a place among the others lining the floor beside him. Draco tilted his head as he watched, opting to ignore that a woman had turned the corner, eyes caught on Draco's frustratingly identifiable white-blond hair, and immediately retreated.

Draco counted another sixty seconds in his head before he gave into the impulse to crane his neck, needing a better look at Theo. With Hermione around, Theo had seemed almost normal, but now that she'd busied herself with rare wandwood antiques, he'd slipped into another mood entirely, cloud cover dulling his usual shine. He'd been off for months, since that conversation at Draco's housewarming get-together in January that—despite occasional, unsuccessful attempts on Draco's behalf to rehash—they'd never fully revisited.

Draco saw Theo's shift manifesting in subtle things: strained smiles, bags beneath his eyes, an inability (or perhaps a disinterest) in bending every room he entered to his charismatic will.

It unsettled Draco. Such a subtle shift, he doubted anyone outside of himself or Blaise had even noticed. Hermione only brought it up recently because it had started affecting her impeccable scheduling techniques.

“Hermione mentioned you haven’t wanted to do any boyfriend trawling lately?”

Theo held up a huge, ornate silver key for inspection. His eyes narrowed, mouth twitched, before he dropped it back into the box.

“Not really,” he said without so much as sparing Draco a second glance.

“You—you haven’t done much with her recently?” It sounded like a question. Draco thought he meant it as a question. But he wasn’t sure what the question actually was. Worse, he wondered if it sounded more like an accusation.

“I don’t want a boyfriend right now.”

Draco nodded. But as Theo continued staring at the bronze key currently under his inspection, the motion had been entirely pointless. Draco grappled for another topic, for something he could say. He didn’t have the first idea what criteria Theo searched for in the antique keys he liked to turn into portkeys.

“You’ve been fiddling with portkeys more? Blaise used one the other month.” Another question not quite question enough for its own good. He knew how to be a friend to Theo. He did. They’d been friends their entire lives in varying degrees of closeness. It ebbed and it flowed, but it still bore a constancy that could only be shared by the last remaining heirs to two Sacred Twenty-Eight families.

But this felt foreign. Good intentions stuck behind ill-placed question marks and statements that sounded like accusations. He just wanted to be sure that Theo was alright. He’d been distant, disinterested in conversation bearing any substance, ever since that conversation in January, drunk on a balcony and probably a little more honest than he’d meant to be.

“I’m getting better. They’re more precise. Blaise landed in the middle of the gardens on my estate. I’d intended inside the greenhouse, but it was a very, very close thing.”

Two more keys made the cut, lined up carefully amongst the others in

a row on the floor by Theo's feet.

"Where else do they go?"

"Anywhere. Everywhere."

"So you need more keys?"

Hermione wound her arms around Draco's torso from behind. He stiffened immediately, nearly jumped, but settled as he recognized the hands wrapped around his waist: devious, dangerous hands that he loved. Her small laugh coasted through his shirt fabric and straight to his spine.

Theo looked up, eyes instantly more alert as he lobbed a smirk at her, a break in the clouds.

"Ah, too early, Granger. My selection process is rigorous; I need more time. You'll have to find another historically significant antique to learn about. If you ask nicely, I'm sure Draco will even buy it for you."

She laughed again, arms tightening around his middle. The Weaslette might enjoy making snide remarks about the pointiness of *his* features, but Draco could tell at exactly what angle Hermione had tilted her head to peer around his torso based on the way her own chin of not-insignificant-pointiness dug into his ribs. It didn't seem so pointy, just looking at her. But gods the woman knew how to weaponize it if she leaned into him in just the right, or perhaps wrong, way.

"I'd much rather he'd buy me books. We're going to Flourish and Blotts after this."

"And here I thought we were going to lunch together. Once we set you loose in that bookstore we won't be free until dinner, at the earliest, perhaps not even until breakfast tomorrow morning." Theo arched a brow as he spoke, weighing two keys between his hands and maintaining what looked so much like an effortless smile.

She released Draco's middle. "I'll let you take as much time as you like with your keys if I can have as long as I want with my books. Deal?"

Theo stuttered a short, disbelieving kind of laugh, the first genuine expression Draco had seen on his face the entire day.

"Wagers? From a Gryffindor? Who taught you that?" His eyes flicked to Draco. "Nevermind. I do *not* want to know what sorts of things you

two bet about. But you have a deal.”

Draco glanced down at Hermione, who had stepped into view beside him. She smiled, first at Theo, then at him. She leaned, bumping her hip into his—well, more into his mid thigh—before she left them again, presumably to find another antique to learn about.

Theo’s demeanor shifted immediately, clouds rolling back overhead. Draco didn’t know if he ought to take solace in the fact that Theo didn’t seem to be making any effort to hide his unusual mood around him. Theo returned to his keys, more careful and methodical in his selection process than he had been with Hermione watching. When she’d been standing with them, he almost looked light-hearted, like he enjoyed the process. But now, each selection had a strange undercurrent to it, a sense of urgency, of desperation, of *need* to identify just the right one.

Draco hovered, failing to ask the right questions, as Theo sifted through the rest of the keys until he’d finally made his selections, concluding their time in the antique shop. Theo’s strange demeanor—now focused on the bag of keys that jingled with his every step as they walked to Flourish and Blotts—resurfaced any time Hermione dipped out of sight.

Draco wondered how much energy it took to turn on whatever performance he turned on for Hermione. It had to be exorbitant, based on how it so instantly slipped as she abandoned them at the threshold to the bookstore, beelining to her favorite corner packed with works on Arithmancy and Ancient Runes.

Theo paused at an atrocious display of new releases; far too many versions of Potter’s face stared back at them from the dozens of covers on display. Theo picked up a book, flipped it over, and made a thoughtful noise as he read the back. Draco found he didn’t particularly want to look at Potter’s unblinking face for too long and opted to gaze elsewhere, perhaps in search of a riot of chestnut colored curls.

“An unofficial biography,” Theo said from beside him. “They’re calling Potter the ‘master of death.’” Draco snorted, glancing back at Theo.

Theo’s mouth twisted into a considering frown before he shrugged, head tilting with the motion. “Seems a bit dramatic, don’t you think?”

“It’s Potter. Of course it’s dramatic.”

“Thought you two were not-friends-but-not-enemies anymore?” Theo returned the book to its kin, dozens of Potters blinking at them from behind his stupid black spectacles.

“He’s fine. His wife is more tolerable than he is but—he’s a bit of an inescapable entity in Hermione’s life, so.” Draco gestured vaguely to his person, shrugging as he did so. “I’m being civil, making—something peace-like. He throws a tolerable party.”

Rather than respond to that, Theo stared at the books, brows drawn together. They’d just had an almost-lively, normal conversation. But as he stared at Potter’s unofficial biography, Theo’s liveliness fell away again.

“I wouldn’t mind a title like that,” he said, eyes narrowed as if something on the cover of the book required solving, understanding. “Perhaps I’ll go for ‘master of space and time.’ I’ve already got the time turner. Working on perfecting portkeys—maybe that’s the thing I can do. That I’m good at.”

Draco couldn’t believe what he’d just heard.

“Theo, you’re good at literally almost everything you try. It’s obnoxious, honestly. If you hadn’t been my housemate and childhood friend I’d have called you a swot as ruthlessly as I did Hermione.”

Draco fought the impulse to step between Theo and the book display; the extended eye contact with Potter’s photograph had started to veer towards menacing. It didn’t even appear that Theo had heard him.

“Maybe that’s my curse,” Theo said, finally looking up at Draco. “Constantly wondering about the ‘what-ifs.’ What could I have changed? Where could I have gone? But never doing any of it.”

It was as if they’d used the time turner in question, stepped back in time to January, on Draco’s balcony, drunk and a bit despondent. Had these thoughts been plaguing Theo for months?

“Theo. I’m—worried about you. Are you okay?”

“You asked me that before.”

“And the answer was clearly no, but you walked away. And you haven’t let me ask again for months. You’re just—pretending.”

“It’s exhausting.”

There was a bit of honesty, a tiny sliver of truth. Theo's eyes widened. He shook his head, and Draco got the distinct impression that he hadn't meant to reveal so much, speak with such candor.

"It's fine," Theo said, taking a half step away. "I'm handling it."

"Is this about the vault? I know it being empty was a disappointment but—maybe you could fill it? You're good at so much—your portkeys and stuff."

"It's not—it is—Draco, I'm fine. Don't worry about me. I'm just having an off couple of months."

"Theo—"

"Have a nice lunch with Granger. I've got to go."

And before Draco could object, or even blink to clear his thoughts at the suddenness of Theo's shift, he'd been left alone, standing in front of *The Unofficial Biography of Harry Potter* and his disconcerting stare.

"Did I just see Theo leave?" Hermione asked, sliding up beside him and tilting her head at the dozens of Potters in front of them. "Well that's unsettling," she added with a slight shiver.

"He had to go."

She frowned. "Oh," she said, posture dropping. "I'd been looking forward to lunch. Is everything alright?"

Draco didn't even consider lying to her, hiding the truth, or otherwise omitting in any way.

"I'm not sure."

Her hand found his arm, squeezing at the inside of his elbow.

"We'll have to have him over soon, check in on him?"

Draco agreed, already planning an owl to Blaise, hoping he could help.

A wild curl called to Draco, spiralling away from Hermione's face. He reached out and tucked it behind her ear before leaning to kiss her temple. Her frown persisted, but he knew that frown, knew that expression; she layered it with thinking, and concern, and a tiny dose of scheming that he found far more attractive than he would have

ever thought of himself.

He could read her. He knew her.

And it struck him, absurdly in the middle of a Flourish and Blotts with Harry Potter's fucking face staring at him from a few dozen different book covers, that he could read Hermione better than he could read Theo. And he'd known Theo his entire life.

That revelation simultaneously made him want to mourn the loss of something with his best friend and celebrate the cementing of something that felt so real, so powerful with Hermione.

He offered her his hand and they walked to lunch. This time, he ignored the stares; they meant nothing, not by comparison, not by a long shot.

—

Meals with Draco's parents deteriorated. He attended purely out of obligation, out of disintegrating respect for the fact that he had very little else in the way of a relationship with them, and that realization managed to somehow both relieve and terrify him. His efforts to maintain what routines they still had though, did not guarantee any sort of comfort. He'd almost grown accustomed to the strange, avoidant conversation his parents had been engaging him with since the beginning of the year, since he'd dropped the idea of *Hermione* on them over Christmas.

Now, their meals had returned to the awful, awkward quiet of the post-betrothal-explosion days, poised between not knowing how to interact and not having the energy to make the effort. It created a strange undercurrent, riptides threatening to pull him under at every *crack* of house elf magic and *tink* of silver against china.

If Draco considered the raw volume of food presented at their meal, it had dropped as steeply as their conversation topics. What had been a veritable smorgasbord of dining options in the months prior had whittled, probably out of spite, to an assortment of pastries, fruit, tea, and eggs—but only if he so fancied making a special request with Tilly.

Despite this decline in grandeur and the disquiet weaving its way across the tablecloth, a different undercurrent swept beneath them.

Draco consumed his breakfast in near-perfect silence for almost forty-five minutes before someone finally spoke. His mother cleared her throat, setting her teacup on its saucer.

“You’ll be pleased to hear,” she started in a perfectly normal tone and as if nothing about their morning meal had been awkward and silent and awful to endure. “After several years of no progress, your father’s request to commute his sentence has been heard.”

“Heard?”

“Accepted,” Narcissa said, offering him a close-lipped smile before taking another sip of her tea.

His mother’s words were an undertow, pulling Draco’s feet from beneath him, torn from safe shallows and dragged to open sea. The entire surface of his skin tingled, pinpricks of anxiety battering him like waves. He turned to see Lucius watching him from the head of the table. When he’d decided to abandon his ever-present copy of *The Daily Prophet*, Draco could not say.

Draco swallowed; he could feel his Adam’s apple dragging down his neck. He resisted the urge to clear his throat.

“But—the Ministry. They haven’t wanted anything to do with”—he looked from his father to his mother and back again, implication mostly understood—“any of us. They bin your files every year.”

Lucius lifted a brow, a dangerous, proud sort of amusement flickering across his face. Draco hadn’t seen that kind of satisfaction on his father’s face in years.

“We finally found the right palms to grease. The right incentive, for the right person, goes a long way.”

“And they—just like that?” Draco couldn’t comprehend it. His father’s house arrest had felt so permanent, so immutable. That it might actually be shortened—he’d taken the Ministry’s dismissal of them at face value.

“Just like that,” Lucius said, the corner of his mouth lifting to a smirk. Draco knew that expression; he used it regularly himself. It only occurred to him—right then and there—where he’d learned it, who

he'd fashioned it after.

"I don't—" Draco started, gaze pinging between his mother and his father. "I don't understand *how*."

"This is how things like this usually work," Lucius said. A supreme satisfaction seeped from his aura. "You don't get what you want. Until you finally do."

Something about seeing his mother looking at Lucius, with a pride and fondness Draco hadn't seen so overtly in so long, made it all that much worse. His father seemed more like himself, his mother seemed pleased about it, and that rapid orbit of the way things used to be couldn't possibly be sustained for long. Orbits came in two forms: stable or degrading. This one felt doomed straight for a black hole.

Draco addressed the tablecloth somewhere between his mother and father when he spoke again. "So what does all that mean?"

Narcissa answered, teeth bared in something that looked like a true, genuine smile.

"As of the end of the week, your father will have his wand back. And he will be permitted to leave the property. He will be a normal, respected member of society again."

Once upon a time, Draco might have held his tongue, might have choked on words left unspoken. But time and distance and an insistent Gryffindor had softened his reflex to hold it all in. Sometimes—in this case, the worst time—the words spilled out anyway.

"He will never be a normal, respected member of society again." Draco sucked in a breath, surprised with himself. Cresting on that wave of surprise: invigoration. Fuck, if it didn't feel good to just say it. "Don't you see that? Money and a commuted sentence won't convince anyone to forget what this family has done. *I* still get looks. *Theo* gets them and he wasn't even marked."

It was his explosion over Hermione all over again. Was he stuck in some kind of loop? Some sort of inability to have a meal with his family that didn't include an emotional outburst involving far too much cathartic candor?

He heaved, lungs stinging from what must have been a lack of oxygen he hadn't even noticed. He powered on, poorly restrained by his parents' stunned silence. "I don't know what kind of world you think

exists outside this property, but it's not one that will welcome you. Not as you are now."

Lucius finally snapped, cane cracking against stone floors.

"I know exactly what kind of world is out there. One where my son thinks his duties to this family mean nothing. That they are *optional*. I raised you to respect our traditions, our history."

Draco couldn't feel his fingers, possibly not his toes, either. Whole extremities blinked out of existence as he tried to control his breathing, tried not to lose his temper. So much had already been fractured at this table. He didn't want to break anything else.

His jaw ached as he held his temper tightly. "You raised me to believe you blindly."

"Draco, stop this," Narcissa interjected from across the table. Her smile had vanished, replaced by pursed lips and wide eyes that begged him not to ruin this for them. "You should be pleased. We will finally be able to resume normal life."

"Normal life?" He couldn't help but laugh, head shaking at the absurdity of such a thought.

Then the thought more fully sank in. *Normal life*. What did that entail? What *would* that entail? Whatever their *normal life* looked like before had been completely obliterated and deemed illegal, fallen entirely out of favor. *Normal life* didn't have a place in *modern life*.

It occurred to Draco that his parents had been treating the past several years—this house arrest—like some kind of extended stasis charm. They waited, biding their time until they could have their version of normal again. A cold dread settled in the pit of Draco's stomach. Did that mean they had no intentions of evolving under the pressures that had changed the world around them while they paid their penance in this manor?

Neither offered any sort of response to his question, if it was really a question at all.

He locked eyes with his mother.

"This is like a horror movie." He felt enough fear and dread, at least, for it to be such a thing.

She tilted her head, a line forming between her brows.

“Movie?”

Draco blinked, air whooshing out of him. Of course. She had no idea what a movie was. Neither of them did. Movies had no part in their version of normal, in either the past or present.

He stared at the strawberries on his plate, incapable of looking at his parents’ unsettling excitement. He didn’t want to think about what their new version of normal looks like.

The last time they’d had *normal*, he’d ended up as cannon fodder in a war that meant absolutely nothing.

—

Draco returned from breakfast with his parents at his usual time, having suffered through the remainder of the meal in an uncomfortable silence. Acid churned in his stomach as his parents moved onto excited conversation about the expansion of their social calendar now that Lucius would no longer be bound to the manor.

As he exited the Floo, Draco tumbled into Hermione. He looped his arms around her middle out of instinct, twisting as he took a large step over a stack of books in an attempt to avoid falling on her, falling on books, or simply falling on the floor. Her hands found his upper arms, stabilizing him.

“What is—Hermione?”

Based on his quick assessment of the space as he righted himself—claiming a tiny, open spot of floor—every single book owned between the two of them had been stacked on their living room floor. Draco might have taken a step back in surprise if he’d had any room to move. But at the smallest shuffle, his dragonhide shoes bumped up against the spine of a book.

“I’m organizing.”

“I—think we have different definitions of that word.”

She shrugged, scanning the room with a fond smile as she tucked a

curl behind her ear.

"I have to *see* everything that needs organizing in order to organize."

"And why, might I ask, are you reorganizing our books?"

"I keep having to buy more biographies I'm not interested in for barely recognizable public figures whose surnames begin in 'E.' So, it's a good thing you have so much space here. You might even need to buy some more shelves."

He chuckled.

"You mean *we* have so much space here. This is your flat, too."

Her smile didn't vanish, but it did freeze, going perfectly still in a way that said, without focus, it would have disappeared entirely; only her willpower kept it in place.

"I know."

He felt suddenly like she needed convincing. Which he couldn't understand.

"It is."

"I know," she said again. "I just—well, since I don't pay for anything, I don't really feel like I'm contributing."

"You don't have to."

The books caged Draco in and separated him from her, a tower of tomes between them.

She scanned the room again, this time her smile twisted towards a grimace. "It doesn't so much feel like my home, in that sense. So I decided to reorganize the books today. I thought maybe—if our collections were better integrated—"

Draco stepped over a stack, a strangling tension in his chest requiring that he close the distance between them. How many months had it been now? She'd moved in with him in the middle of January and now, in May, she'd had this realization?

He'd just assumed she shared his wild, incandescent happiness. He assumed their new arrangement worked as beautifully for her as it did for him.

He tried to close the gate to an unwelcome stampede of thoughts inside his head, but they broke through his faulty latches, barreling to the forefront of his mind.

What if she decided the flat didn't feel enough like a home?

What if she'd grown tired of feeling that way?

What if she decided this wasn't working for her anymore?

What if she left?

"How can I help?" he asked. He had to know. He *needed* to know.
"What can I do to make it better?"

He took another step closer. If she picked up one of her hundreds of books, she could fit it between them, but just so, nothing more.

She leaned away under the guise of examining the room, searching for her answer.

"I've just—been providing for myself since, well"—her eyes glassed over and widened, a swell of tears catching her off guard—"oh, no. Why am I crying?"

He didn't know. But he'd started to panic, caught between wanting to reach out and offer her comfort and give her space to pull herself together.

"Gods," she continued, dragging a finger beneath her eye to wipe away the tear she barely gave a chance to fall. "I guess it's been since the war? When I obliterated my parents? And we—we were on the run after that and since then, really, I've just—provided. But especially after Ron and I broke up—"

She sighed. With a halfhearted grasp, she reached out to hold his hand, fingers barely entwined with his, but a comfort nevertheless. "My little flat—I know it wasn't much, but I paid for it. Which, I know doesn't mean much the same thing to you since money just—is different for your family. But I bought my own groceries and managed my own wards and I—it was mine. None of this is mine."

She pulled her hand away, wiping a fresh well of tears with a frustrated growl. "It's not worth crying about. I don't—I don't want to cry about it."

A sinkhole opened up inside Draco's chest, a painful seizing as it swallowed his heart, his lungs, his ribs: blood, muscle, and bone all consumed by the agony that Hermione didn't feel at home with him.

She'd gone quiet, slow breathing, tears held at bay as she looked helplessly at the book-inundated room around them.

He didn't know how to help. He had so little control. Almost none. So he clung to the things she said that he *could* control, that he could give her.

"Do you want to manage the wards? Build them from scratch yourself? I've been using a variant on my family's but—you can change them—make them yours. Ours. Gods, Hermione, I—"

He'd already drawn his wand, conjuring the flat's wards and dismantling them rune by rune. Hermione watched him work, saying nothing. "All of this is yours. You don't"—he pulled back another layer in the wards—"I don't want you to feel guilty for not *having* to do everything on your own, by yourself."

Draco took a half step towards the Floo, addressing the access wards directly. He'd entirely lost himself in the process, determined that Hermione should never feel that way again. "That's not—not how family works. You get support, you get help, you—"

"—is that what we are?" Hermione's question, quiet and breathless, pulled him from his fixation with the wards. He'd hardly even paid attention to his words, babbling as he worked.

"Are we—what?" His world caught up with him in an echo, finally remembering the things he'd said. His heart gave one huge, painful thump inside his chest as he swallowed.

"You said—are we a family? Is that what we are?"

Draco realized he'd gone a little agape, a little panicked. Of all things, an image of his parents' pleased faces discussing his father's impending return to society flashed behind his eyes. Draco had no idea what their return to normal life would require of him, how that future dynamic would look.

He only knew what he wanted in his dynamic with Hermione. He abandoned caution. He'd already essentially said it, anyway.

"Yes," he said. And he meant it. To him, she was family. And saying so

felt brave and stupid and reckless like a certain Gryffindor he knew but, weirdly, it also exhilarated him. “Yes,” he said again. “Yes, we’re family? Don’t you think?”

He found something very interesting about the brickwork around the fireplace: an easier thing to focus on than Hermione’s face. He’d let too much out. In a lifetime spent holding in the things he really wanted to say, Hermione had the astonishing ability to break down every last wall used to keep the words back. But now that he’d started, now that the words had slipped through, he couldn’t stop. So long as he kept his focus on the bricks or the grout or the mantel, he could say the things he’d yet to figure out how to say directly to her face.

“I think it, at least,” he said, perhaps clarifying, perhaps digging a deeper grave. “And when we’re married, I don’t want you to feel like this isn’t your home.” A thought struck him. Finally, he tore his gaze from the fireplace. “Should we move?”

Hermione blinked, doing nothing to mask how wide her eyes had grown. She tilted her head, some of the color draining from her face.

“When we’re married?”

Draco’s skin felt alive, panicked and crawling. He couldn’t help but see an image of his father, forcing his way between them. She must have seen a question in the way he failed to respond, his manic mood rendering him momentarily mute.

“You said—when we’re married. Like it’s a fact. Or an inevitability.”

Draco’s mania stalled; his world stopped. The earth, for that moment, ceased rotation. Time paused. How had he ended up so deep in such a conversation he hadn’t even intended to have?

“It—I—it is?” He didn’t know if he was asking it as a question. “You’ve moved in with me. That’s—well that’s normally not done until after marriage, but this is hardly a traditional courtship, is it?”

He couldn’t ignore how she tensed at the word courtship. Like it was some kind of dirty, terrible word that offended her many and varied progressive sensibilities.

Her breath caught before she could fully speak her sentence, as if her words stuck on sticky vocal cords. He watched as something unreadable and entirely overwhelmed overtook her features.

“Is that—a proposal?” She looked legitimately terrified, voice quiet and contained. Eyes still wide, conveying every ounce the confusion that he, too, felt.

“I—” he started. He kept doing that. How did he keep doing that? Stumbling into milestones with her. First an accidental date and now what, an accidental almost-proposal? He supposed, technically, it wasn’t *not* a proposal. But it certainly wasn’t a proposal, either. He felt a little like he might be sick.

“Would you?” he asked, only belatedly realizing it had barely even been a sentence.

“Would I what?”

“If I asked you. Would you say yes? If—if this, or at some time, if there was a proposal?”

He definitely felt like he might be sick. Because if that hadn’t been an accidental proposal before, *this* certainly was. He wanted to hop back into the Floo. He couldn’t go to the manor, but Theo’s place would suffice.

She’d been right, too. He had thought of marriage as a sort of inevitability, even if he’d never outright admitted it to himself. What else did people do after they lived with each other? Break up? His stomach, which already felt as if it had descended into the earth, managed to drop even further.

“Draco,” she started. “Your family barely even—”

“—You’re my family.” If nothing else, he knew that much.

She cleared her throat. “Your parents. They’ve barely gotten over the shock of—”

“—My father’s sentence is being commuted. He’ll have his wand by the end of the week. He’ll be able to leave the manor.”

It felt important that she knew, even if he couldn’t explain to himself why. He’d lost complete control over this conversation, over what was meant to be an attempt to help her feel at ease in their home. Instead, he’d probably made it so much worse. He might as well have just pulled out that notorious ruby necklace and tried to give that to her again.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I shouldn't have—why don't you see if Theo wants to build new wards with you? He much prefers building them to breaking them. And he does need to get out of his manor more."

She seemed grateful for the diversion, tension around her eyes loosening.

"That's a good idea." She spoke slow words, as if expecting an interruption, or perhaps to change her mind.

Draco nodded his assent. His whole body had tensed, sinkhole haphazardly filled with shifting sands that only masked the damage if he stood very, very still.

"Well. I have to meet Blaise—potions stuff."

"I'll see you later?" she asked, bottom lip pulled between her teeth, flesh washed out as she held her normal blood flow hostage.

"After I have dinner at the manor, yes."

She frowned. "Right. But we're still having dinner together tomorrow, aren't we?"

He nodded again, a new thought rushing him. "And I was thinking. Two meals a day—it's a lot. Perhaps I could see if, well, maybe I could stop taking breakfasts with them."

She swallowed, a small nod, a smaller smile.

"I was planning on cooking for you—tomorrow."

"I could take you out instead?"

Another idea unfurled. His parents knew—had known in some capacity—about them for months. They still spent so much of their time in muggle London out of habit, but they could go anywhere, wizarding or not. Make a scene. Be grand. And he could already see her dissent forming.

"I haven't been able to spoil you," he said.

"I don't—I don't need to be spoiled."

"Paris. I could take you to Paris?"

"For dinner?"

“Or the weekend.”

“Tomorrow’s Monday.”

“The week, then.”

“I have to work.”

Draco’s excitement ground to a halt. “Right,” he said.

“So I’ll cook.”

Draco glanced at the clock. So much time had passed and yet he barely felt like he’d blinked. He was already late to meeting Blaise, but that seemed far less important than the witch standing in front of him. He lifted his hand, cradling her cheek in his palm as he held his face near hers.

“I love you,” he said, needing her to hear.

“I love you, too.”

He needed to hear it as well.

Chapter End Notes

so much alpha/beta love to [icepower55](#), [Endless_musings](#), and [persephone_stone](#)! it's astonishing to think about how many thousands of words they have read and reread for me. they are simply the greatest!

hope y'all don't mind an early chapter drop! I'm travelling this weekend and will have questionable internet access so I figured i'd rather get it up now than stress over trying to make it happen tomorrow!

thank you so much for continuing to read this story! i appreciate so, SO much see everyone's thoughts and getting to chat with you here, on tumblr, on discord, or wherever the internet brings us together!!

Chapter 30: -.666, -.750, -.833

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

June

tick tock tick tock

The thing about fights with Hermione—which often ended up more like runaway, misfired conversations drowned in good intentions—was that they never seemed to last. They were never more important than the other things in their life. Sure, they sometimes happened. Occasionally with the same spectacular sort of implosion as Draco's complete and utter fumble wherein he didn't-exactly-not-propose to her. But at the end of the day, they could both agree that *it* would never trump *them*.

It was a unique sort of conflict management in which Draco learned he could simply *decide* not to let something affect him, or his relationship with Hermione. They could move on: together. So he didn't propose. Though he didn't *not* propose, either. Not yet. He'd left a stasis charm on a bigger relationship milestone—the biggest, he could probably argue—and he knew he couldn't manage it indefinitely.

Such impending considerations for his future only registered in a peripheral way as he woke on the morning of his birthday: rested, contented, and with a breathy, beautiful voice singing in his ear.

He smiled, eyes still closed as he laid on his side, back facing Hermione. He savored each and every warm touchpoint where her body pressed against him as she leaned over his shoulder, hot breath gusting across his ear, fingers walking a flaming path up his ribs.

He dared to open his eyes, bedroom awash in a faint blue, early morning light. He twisted to see her, smile shifting into a smirk, the sort of affected snark he was allowed to indulge in on his birthday.

“While this is undoubtedly the best start to a birthday I have ever had, your lyricism might require work. I don't know that you can repeat *happy birthday to you* over and over again and call it a song, lovely as

the tune may be.”

He rolled more fully on his back, infected by her smile as she giggled, quieted, then sobered.

“No, Draco. It’s a—you know what? Never mind. I’ll forgive your pureblood ignorances just this once. But only because it’s your birthday.”

He smiled, not even remotely riled by her implication that she knew something he didn’t. He leaned in, hands winding through her hair as he kissed her: lazy, sweet, smiling birthday kisses for the beautiful woman he had the pleasure of waking up to in his—their—bed.

Her breath caught against his mouth as he pulled her bottom lip between his teeth, a gentle pressure as he endeavored to savor every last touch from her. He let her lip pop free, smiling, still nose to nose with her.

“I’ve caught up with you again.” He brushed his thumb across her cheekbone, memorizing the way her eyelids fluttered. “I’m twenty-four, you’re twenty-four. Always just a bit behind you, I am.”

He tasted her small laugh. Her eyes fluttered back open as she rolled them in response to his weak, self-deprecating jab. Not so long ago, he wouldn’t have been capable of such a statement, not even of conceiving it.

He disentangled a hand from her curls, slipping it beneath the covers in search of her skin, twining his legs with hers, pulling her close.

He found her skin. Easily. He found *a lot* of skin, and something distinctly lace-like.

Draco nearly choked on his own tongue as he threw the covers back.

“What in the— *fucking hell, Hermione.*”

He might require emergency services. He didn’t much fancy spending his birthday in the hospital, but Hermione Granger had just made an attempt on his life via her undergarments. She flushed a bright pink from her chest to her cheeks as he struggled to regain his ability to speak.

“You weren’t wearing that when we went to bed last night.”

She held a curl hostage between her fingers, twisting and pulling it as she chewed at her bottom lip.

“No, I—woke up a little early and changed.”

She reached for the blankets in an attempt to pull them back up. Draco snatched them from her, silently grateful for his Seeker’s reflexes.

“Oh no you don’t, Granger.” Impossibly, she flushed a deeper shade at his slip into using her surname. “Is this my present? Because if it is”—he flipped an errant curl over her shoulder and then let his forefinger trace her collarbone, towards her shoulder, finding a satin strap—“you have truly outdone yourself.”

She groaned, one arm crossing her middle in a futile attempt at protecting her modesty. Draco couldn’t fight his smile; the apples of his cheeks strained from the force of his grin. He slipped his finger beneath the strap and encouraged it to slip over her shoulder, falling limp against her upper arm.

“This is so outside your norm, love. There’s so much lace and silk and *fucking Merlin*.” He paused, pulled in a breath through his nose. He’d missed it the first time, predictably distracted by her tits. “Is that a *garter belt*?”

He and Hermione had a very healthy sex life. He knew this. He’d never in his life been so obsessively attracted to a woman. And she’d told him once, in the afterglow of several outstanding orgasms as he struggled to catch his breath, that she hadn’t even known she could come more than once during sex. They had physically satisfying sex. Emotionally satisfying sex. The kind of sex that Draco literally fantasized about getting to spend his entire fucking life having.

And now she’d gone and made it better by several orders of magnitude. She had purchased and put on a gorgeous little red lingerie set—he could forgive her predictable Gryffindor color choice—and she looked completely otherworldly in it. Beauty that transcended his understanding of reality as it ground his brain to a halt and sent all his blood rushing south. And all of it for *him*.

He settled back against his pillows, fingers laced together behind his head as he stretched, settling in.

“Well, let’s have a look, love. I’d like to get the full view.”

She clawed for the sheets again, refusing to meet his gaze.

“Oh, Draco. Don't embarrass me.”

She only managed to cover half of herself before he was on her, body wedged against hers. He resisted a very vocal, yet nonverbal acknowledgement—a groan or a grunt or a moan—of just how much he loved the feeling of silk and lace against his skin.

“Embarrass you?” His voice came out low, deadly serious. “Why would you be embarrassed?”

She blinked several times: tension melted from her muscles, seeped from her skin, banished from their bed.

“You said it yourself,” she started. He kissed near the base of her throat, along her clavicle, restraint wavering. “This is hardly my usual—I thought you might like it but I’m not”—she swallowed—“well, I’m not really sure I’m cut out for such impractical undergarments.”

Draco literally could not fathom such a thing. Did she not look at herself in the mirror when she put on this glorious, outstanding, utterly debilitating collection of fabric scraps?

He surged against her, one arm around her middle, lips traveling up her neck, finding her ear.

“Do you feel that, Granger?” She shivered when he used her surname again. He rocked against her, cock painfully hard against her hip.

“You have to know how gorgeous you look, how badly I want you.” He canted his hips again, enjoying a fractional burst of pleasure. “You putting on this ridiculous, impractical, *fucking divine* lingerie is the greatest birthday present I didn’t even know I wanted.”

He forgot to breathe when her hand wrapped around his cock through his pants.

“You are”—a kiss behind her ear—“the most”—a kiss beneath her jaw—“beautiful fucking creature”—a kiss at the base of her throat—“I have ever seen”—a kiss through flimsy lace, tongue teasing her nipple—“in my entire life.”

She writhed beneath him, squirming for contact just as desperately as he needed it, already flushed and panting and well beyond her embarrassment. He pulled away enough to look at her face. Despite

his impulse to have her quickly and desperately, he intended to make the most of this glorious deviation from their norm.

He placed tiny, barely-there kisses along the laced edges of her bra, memorizing the shape, color, and feel of it against her skin, against his lips. If he wasn't careful he would devour her.

"I'm very seriously considering skipping my birthday breakfast with my parents. And they've mentioned on no less than six occasions how disappointed they are not to have me joining them regularly in the mornings any longer."

She whined: a needy, instructional sound meant to tell him that he was talking too much, that his lips had strayed too far from her skin. Her hips lifted off the mattress, driving against this thigh.

He dragged his tongue down her sternum, down the center of her stomach, straight over the lacy fabric on her garter belt —*fucking garter belt*— and stopped at the edge of her deliciously tiny knickers.

"I'd also be willing to miss our lunch with Theo and Blaise if it means I can keep you in this bed all day." He angled to look back up at her as he let his breath coast along the wet trail left by his tongue. She released a small, frustrated huff; he smiled. How he loved to tease her, to string her impatience along as far as possible, a thread stretched to its snapping point. And when it snapped, *gods* she was breathtaking.

"Draco," she breathed, a frustrated growl edging out her tone. "I woke you up with *plenty* of time before you have to go."

"Oh, did you?"

Her fingers threaded through his hair, nails against his scalp.

"I did."

"And what were you hoping to accomplish in all that time?"

"Draco Malfoy, if you do not take this ridiculous underwear off me right now, I swear to Merlin I will do it myself. And then take care of my own needs, you frustrating man."

He laughed against her stomach before doing the opposite of what she asked, sliding back up her body and kissing the pout from her lips.

"I have two questions," he said, willpower nearly failing him as he

relished the feeling of her body beneath him, her skin on his, two flimsy layers of fabric separating them. He ground his hips against hers as he asked, “Do you promise? And can I watch?”

He’d never had a better birthday in his life.

—

Lucius and Narcissa met Draco in the Floo parlor, dressed in their traveling cloaks with tight, wary expressions on their faces. True to his word, and finally feeling like he’d found something of a balance between his old, obligatory routines with his parents and his new lifestyle with Hermione, Draco had removed breakfast at the manor from his schedule. He still spent nearly every evening dining with his parents, strained as it was. But he gave his mornings to Hermione. His afternoons, too. His nights. His dreams. As much of himself as he had to offer.

But evidently, his parents had made reservations for a birthday breakfast at a new, expensive restaurant in Diagon Alley as soon as Lucius’s sentence had been commuted.

The gesture was—thoughtful. Though inconvenient. It would mark the first occasion that he ventured back out into public with his parents.

He’d barely accepted the box of toffees from his mother, greeting her with a perfunctory kiss to the cheek and a murmured thanks, when Lucius gestured for them to leave.

“Our reservation was for ten minutes ago,” Lucius said, jaw tight, fingers flexing on the head of his cane. Draco followed the motion with cautious eyes; it felt unreal, knowing his father had a wand there again. Something about his father’s wand felt less like a tool for everyday life and more like a weapon he could wield. Knowing Lucius had it in his possession snapped the muscles along Draco’s spine to stiff attention, incapable of feeling at ease.

He met his father’s eyes.

“I apologize. I got held up at home.” *Fucking my girlfriend through the mattress, over and over and over again.* Draco knew he probably looked a little bit shagged. Not excessively so, but he hadn’t bothered pulling

himself into the pristine condition his parents likely expected of him: cufflinks left on the dresser, hair in place, but wavy. He'd opted to look just a bit more casual, a bit more freshly fucked.

A muscle in Lucius's jaw flexed—the pterygoid, Draco thought: a muscle attached to the mandible he only knew about because Mr. Granger had insisted they make an anatomical lesson out of Draco's Christmas gift the year before. But only after the initial shock had worn off and the brandy had started to sink in, of course.

Without another word, they Floo'd to the Leaky and proceeded to their restaurant. Stepping inside, Draco knew exactly why his parents might want to patronize such a place: expensive, exclusive, and touting a robust, authentically French menu with novel, self-seasoning dishes that adjusted to an individual's palate. The entire establishment screamed of old money in new packaging, side ventures for the extra Galleons earned from extraneous accounts long forgotten by old estates. Just the sort of thing that looked and felt like progress—new dishes, fresh linens, updated architecture—but that still excluded anyone and everyone who couldn't afford the literal and figurative price of entry.

Draco had almost stopped noticing the stares, having grown more accustomed to them in the time he spent with Hermione in the wizarding world. With his parents, though, his skin crawled under the inspection of several sets of eyes as the host led them to a table.

Lucius made it worse: head held high, haughty expression pulling his lips into a sneer, ostentatious fucking cane clicking on the wooden floors with every step he took. Everything about his posture challenged the other patrons to say something, look for too long, pass judgement on them.

Draco sank into his chair, staring out the nearby window into Diagon Alley, desperately wishing for an escape.

Breakfast with his parents at a restaurant felt much the same as breakfast with them at the manor, but with the added benefit of an audience. Uncomfortable stares. Tight facial expressions. Stunted, awkward attempts at conversation. The change of scenery didn't change the actors in the stage play his family had become.

Draco reeled from the emotional whiplash. His morning with Hermione had been so perfect, so mind-numbingly lovely. But this? This was awkward and uncomfortable. Every clink of silver against

their plates sent a cringe careening up and down his spine, seeking release in expressions he kept forcibly neutral.

Narcissa glanced around the restaurant, a cascade of faces looking away as she scanned the room. She released a small, but tight breath.

“We won’t be forced out of public from a few stares,” she said, dragging her knife through a perfectly rolled french omelette.

Lucius gave a stiff nod. “We have just as much right to dine here as they do.”

“Do we?” Draco asked without thinking. He blinked up at his parents, who had both paused mid-bite at his sudden participation in their conversation. He resisted the urge to sigh. He’d already committed, he might as well dig himself a little deeper. “What if the owner of this place is muggleborn?” He doubted it, based on what he’d seen of the restaurant, but what-ifs made for important questions when trying to unravel absurdities.

His father scowled. His mother tittered a nerve-grating laugh. Draco waited for an answer.

“Don’t be silly, dear,” Narcissa said. “Such a lovely place like this? Quite unlikely.”

Draco tilted his head. The loveliness had nothing to do with it. More likely, the prime real estate spot—which Draco had learned from experience looking at shop options with Blaise—would have been prohibitively expensive for those without generational vaults at Gringotts or an extensive list of connections who could remove barriers. Beyond that, it was the overt, excessive use of magic for every little thing.

Narcissa’s gaze slipped from his face, out the window behind him instead.

“Oh, is that Theodore? We still haven’t had him over. And Blaise, too.”

Her eyes widened, hardened, and closed off completely in the space of a blink. What had been a casual sort of interest on her face transformed into disbelief, waylaid by something that almost looked like betrayal.

Draco turned to follow her stare and felt immediately as if he’d been

dunked into a frozen lake. Theo and Blaise had just walked out of the Quidditch supply shop across from the restaurant with Hermione at their heels.

“*Disgraceful*,” Lucius seethed, fork falling onto the tabletop.

Draco knew he must have looked murderous—his own face contorting itself into a scowl and a furious stare as his father spoke—because whatever else Lucius had intended to say stalled in his throat.

Draco fisted the tablecloth where it draped over the edge of the table, falling onto his lap. He twisted it up in his hand, a tight, angry fist holding him together as he tried very, very hard not to make a scene in public, not to draw any more attention than they already attracted.

Draco’s plate, silver, and glassware all slid closer to him as he bunched up the fabric from the tablecloth, tugging everything a bit closer to the ledge.

“What exactly is so *disgraceful*, Father? They’re just walking. Shopping. Do you even realize how—don’t you understand who she is to me?” Anger ate his words, so he tried again. “Could you, perhaps—just on my birthday—pretend not to abhor the woman I love?”

Lucius matched Draco’s anger breath for breath, disdain carved into his features.

“It’s not about such silly sentimentality as that, Draco. If I am not allowed to *abhor* her for being a bastardization of magical ability, for flaunting her substandard breeding and manners in our faces, or for gutting my ancestral home, am I not at least allowed to abhor her for taking my son from me?”

Draco did not often think of his father as being snake-like. Not when he’d had The Dark Lord for comparison. But Lucius hissed the word *son* with such venom that Draco couldn’t help but imagine spitting snakes: vipers or cobras or whatever kind it was that reared and spat and put everything it had into self preservation in the face of a threat.

Worse than the venom was the hurt, lingering just beneath the surface, tugging at Draco, encouraging him to sympathize, to take pity on his father’s position.

Draco ground his teeth together.

If Lucius had wanted to better preserve a relationship with him he

should have done something—something different, something else—long before now. Hermione’s bright, fierce, ruthless voice flared to life inside his head: things she’d said about actions being what counted. Lucius’s actions accounted for very little, if Draco really stopped to consider them.

He would not let Lucius make Hermione a scapegoat for his personal misfortunes now that he could no longer blame her for his political ones, not publicly, at least.

Abruptly, Draco stood.

“Thank you for taking me out for my birthday,” he said, trying to control the furious waver in his voice as he made eye contact with his mother. It killed him that she looked on the verge of tears. “I have to go.”

Narcissa blinked, looking up at him from her place at the table. Draco had the sense he’d just witnessed her experiencing her worst fears actualizing. “As a reminder,” he said. “I won’t be dining with you this evening.”

It was another blow, he knew it. But Draco was feeling spiteful, furious, offended for himself and for Hermione. And he felt so, so disappointed in his parents. Narcissa physically recoiled at his words, hands falling limp off the table. Draco didn’t dare look at Lucius.

“I don’t think I’ll be dining with you for the rest of the week, either,” he added. A pause for consideration. “Or for the foreseeable future.” It hurt more than he wanted it to, saying such a thing, such a damning, permanent-feeling thing. It felt like taking what last little scraps of hope he’d clung to and *bombarda’ing* them to bits. “I just—I don’t know,” he said as a final, inconclusive sort of apology, even while knowing they didn’t deserve one.

His box of toffees remained on the tabletop as he walked away.

He’d wanted it to work with his parents. He’d hoped for years now that they could evolve, that they would, with the right amount of time. They kept resisting him every step of the way, and he, a tired, worn-down traveller, needed a break.

Thank the gods for Hermione's wild, distinctive hair. He spotted her, and by association Theo and Blaise, down the street when he exited the restaurant, heart pounding from the furious, disappointed, and appalled looks his parents had given him as he excused himself from his own birthday meal.

Draco caught up with them as they paused in front of a used bookshop.

"—in two hours, are you capable of spending less than two hours in a bookstore, Granger?" Hermione swatted Theo's arm in response. Dramatically, he massaged his bicep, hissing about her violence.

Draco wrapped his arms around her shoulders from behind, dropping a kiss at the crown of her head.

"Careful," he said with a wink. "She bites, too."

That earned Draco a swat of his own and a retching sound from Theo. Blaise only rolled his eyes as he leaned against the storefront.

Hermione turned in his arms, looking up at him with a tiny furrow between her brows.

"We weren't supposed to meet for another two hours." It was a question disguised as a statement, but he knew exactly what she meant. He leaned down and kissed her temple, lingering near her ear.

"I'll tell you later," he said in a quiet voice, offering her a small smile as he pulled back.

Her tight smile in return asked another question. *It didn't go well?*

He gave a single, short shake of his head.

She still looked concerned—not exactly a push, but a check to make sure he was alright. Meals with his parents tended to go either *fine* or *spectacularly awful* and she clearly knew which one his morning had been.

"Blaise, if I ever start looking at someone like that you have my permission to hex me," Theo said. He clapped Draco on the shoulder, a clear reminder that he and Hermione were not, in fact, alone.

Draco looked away from Hermione in time to see Blaise's arched

brow, the faintest trace of a smile pulling at his lips.

“Deal.”

Theo just shook his head and pulled something from his pocket.

“So, we’ll just do our after lunch plans before lunch?” he asked, holding up a rusted bronze key.

Hermione looked from the key to Draco to Theo and back to the key again.

“That’s not—is it?” she asked.

“A portkey to our destination, Granger,” Theo twirled the key between his fingers, held right at her eye level.

“And how questionable is its legality?” she asked as she folded her arms across her chest.

“Entirely questionable. But keep your voice down about it.” Theo leaned in, a conspiratory smile flashing across his face. “There are ministry employees afoot and we wouldn’t want them to catch wind of it.”

She rolled her eyes. “Could we not just apparate?”

“This is much more fun.”

With a wink and a glance at Blaise, Theo reached out and took Hermione’s hand just and Blaise caught Draco on the shoulder. Draco sighed and shook his head, wrapping an arm around Hermione’s waist.

“Hold tight,” he whispered in her ear as the portkey whisked them away.

—

They landed with surprising ease in what looked like—

“A Quidditch pitch?” Draco asked.

It took Hermione a second longer to recover herself than it did the rest of them. More than anything else, Draco could see a reluctant wonder crawling across her face. Theo's portkeys were smooth, *almost* pleasant, with less spinning and much less torque at the navel.

She blinked a few times, clearing whatever thoughts had taken control, before she turned to him. "I thought you might want to play a little Quidditch on your birthday."

Fresh cut grass, country air, a light breeze: Draco had hardly realized how much he missed it until that moment.

"My broom?"

"Theo has it."

"Kit?"

"Blaise."

Draco smiled, wrapping his arms around his thoughtful, beautiful witch. "Well, you've just thought of everything, haven't you?"

She smiled. "I even brought a book. Mr. Dwight D. Eisenhower will be keeping me company this afternoon."

"I can't tempt you to take a ride on my broomstick?" Draco asked, leaning into her. He felt the wide grin stretching his face.

She pressed her hands to his chest and pushed him back. "I'm choosing to believe you did not intend that as innuendo because one, it's quite the overdone joke and you're cleverer than that and two, you're being gross in front of your friends. Theo is gagging."

She wasn't wrong; Theo had taken up his retching again, one hand braced against Blaise's shoulder for support. But even as she'd said it, Hermione smirked, flashing him the kind of smile that told him even though she thought he was being ridiculous, she loved him for it anyway.

It was one of his favorite fucking smiles.

She reached into her tiny beaded bag and conjured an opaque shield between herself and the rest of them.

"No peeking, you three," came her voice from behind the milky white oval partitioning her from them.

Draco looked to Theo and Blaise and tilted his head to ask the question, *what is she doing?* Theo just shrugged. Blaise didn't bother with a response.

When she dropped the barrier, Draco's jaw dropped in tandem. She'd swapped her shirt for his Slytherin jersey and, Merlin, did she look imminently fuckable.

"Oh gods, now I really am going to be sick," Theo lamented, turning to face away. Blaise just chuckled.

"Two for one, Granger: gift for Draco and torture for Theo. Impressive."

Hermione practically beamed at the compliment from Blaise. Even Draco felt a bit of second-hand pride that she'd impressed the generally unimpressible Blaise Zabini.

"I'm getting the game set up. Blaise, come help," Theo called, already walking towards the pitch. Draco took the gift of privacy for what it was and stepped right into Hermione's personal space, fingers playing with the jersey's hem.

Hermione bit her lip: a hesitant glance up at him as a tiny hint of blush bloomed to life in her cheeks.

"Do you want to know what I have on under this?"

Draco didn't pause to consider his response. "Please say nothing."

She laughed. "Sorry to disappoint. It's not nothing—but it's the green version of that red lingerie I was wearing this morning."

She rocked once on the balls of her feet, an almost-unnoticeable pause before she committed to her movement; she lined herself up against him, flush. Her voice came out breathy, a whisper, but with enough force to double him over.

"If you play extra well for me, maybe I'll let you take it off me later."

"Maybe?" he asked, voice rough in a strangled throat. "You're telling me you don't already have it written in your planner?"

She bit that damnable lip and Draco very seriously considered abandoning his friends in favor of this witch.

"You don't want to know all the things I have written in my planner

for you today.”

“We don’t need to play Quidditch. Let’s go home. Right now. *Gods*, I love you.”

Hermione did the exact opposite of what he wanted and took a step back, out of his reach.

“You don’t want to abandon Theo and Blaise; they might not give you their present if you do.”

Draco attempted to close the space between them, only to have Hermione step back again, a playful smile breaking like a sunrise across her face.

“Whatever they got me I’ll just buy it for myself.”

Hermione shrugged and giggled, another step out of his reach. “I don’t know about that,” she offered in a sing-song sort of voice.

“Granger doesn’t know something? Impossible.” Theo and Blaise had returned, changed into Quidditch attire. Theo looped a casual arm around Hermione’s shoulder. “So, what is it you don’t know?”

“Divination, mostly. And how to make tea,” Draco supplied, a brow arched. Hermione didn’t even huff, not a drop of indignation. She only shook her head with a half roll to her eyes.

Theo made a dismissive sort of gesture, waving vaguely towards Blaise. “We keep him around for the Divination part.”

Hermione elbowed Theo’s side and nodded towards Draco. For a split second, Theo put on an excellent show of having been debilitated by Hermione’s elbow. To be fair, having been on the receiving end of them, Draco knew she had a fondness for wielding them as weapons to her own devices. As Theo straightened himself, clutching pitifully at his side, he pulled out his wand and sent an envelope flying to Draco.

He caught it and lifted a brow, peeking inside.

“Is this—”

“Quidditch World Cup tickets for August,” Theo confirmed. “For all of us because we want to come, too. But it’s your present. And they’re good seats.” Theo advanced, liberating the envelope from Draco’s hands and pulling out one of the tickets. “Not greased-hands-with-the-

Minister-of-Magic-good, but respectable boxes, nevertheless.”

“Oh. I could have asked Kingsley for you.”

Draco could practically see Hermione’s statement wash over Theo from behind. His eyes went wide, then narrowed, before he released a sigh and shook his head: “Of course she could have.” Theo sounded caught somewhere between being impressed and distraught for not having thought of such a thing himself.

Another thought stole Draco’s attention. He leaned, peering around Theo to catch Hermione’s eyes. “In Italy?”

She smiled. “Italy.”

“And is that why you’ve agreed to come?” he asked, simultaneously teasing and serious.

She reined her smile in, lips pursed, an attempt at coy. Her right shoulder lifted toward her ear, just a bit: a tiny shrug.

“I have always wanted to see Italy.”

Such a simple statement, standing with all of them, about to play Quidditch and celebrate his birthday, filled Draco with a warmth not unlike the magic he used to cast a Patronus.

“Thank you,” he said, eyes shifting to each of them. He clapped Theo on the shoulder. “Truly, thank you.”

In the aftermath of a day that had started so beautifully, transitioned into something terrible, and now found him surrounded by those he loved most with the rest of the day ahead of them, Draco smiled.

Chapter End Notes

so many thanks to my alpha/beta team [icepower55](#), [Endless_musings](#), and [persephone_stone](#)!!

and so many thanks to YOU, too! thank you so much for reading and sticking with this story as it continues to grow! your comments and your conversations with me about it are so motivating and so lovely, I can't even begin to properly express it! i hope you enjoyed this one!!

Chapter 31: -.583, -.666, -.750

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

July

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Draco ran a hand through his hair as the Gringotts cart came to a stop, entirely disheveled from the long, winding trip underground to the old estate vaults. The damp chill that clung to every surface so deep underground rendered his hair potions completely ineffectual.

“I thought the trip to *my* vaults was comically long,” Theo said with a low whistle. The sound ricocheted off the moist, blackened boulders that Draco assumed existed somewhere in the caverns with them. Huge spaces and low lighting left much to his imagination.

“You should have warned me to bring snacks,” Theo said, stepping aside so the goblins accompanying them could begin unlocking Draco’s vault. “I would have grabbed some chocolate frogs or something.”

“You’re being very dramatic.”

“Well, I was promised a pint and an evening at the pub. I’ve been kidnapped, I think.”

“You’ve hardly been kidnapped. We’re on a quick errand.”

The vault doors opened beside them; orange light spilled from the perpetual sconces mounted on the interior stone walls. Draco nodded his thanks to the goblins and grabbed Theo by the elbow, forcing him inside.

Theo grumbled a bit more, something about losing his *precious friend time to bloody errands*.

“We’re still getting drinks,” Draco said. “After.”

“Granger has stolen you from me. And now I’m but an errand

companion? How sad.”

“Hermione has stolen me? You’ve stolen her—back to boyfriend hunting. You know, Saturdays used to be *my* day with her.”

“Yes, well now you have the rest of the week. And what do I have? *Blaise?*”

Draco tossed a small box at Theo, who fumbled as it smacked his open palm, and juggled it frantically to prevent it falling to the floor.

“I thought Blaise was your best friend these days?”

“As it stands, he’s my only option, what with you being all coupled up and nauseatingly happy.” He held up the box, giving it a shake beside his ear in what Draco could only assume was an attempt to discern the contents via auditory clues. “I’m reluctant to make his position as my best friend permanent, however. One can only stomach friends who sit, stare into the middle distance, and ruin antique furniture with smoke damage for so long before one starts to think—perhaps one needs more friends.”

“Sounds exhausting being you, Theo.”

“Truly, it is.” Theo tilted his head and held the box out. “What is this?”

“The reason we’re here.”

Draco watched as Theo finally took in his surroundings, recognizing the vault they’d entered for what it was.

“Ah—your family’s heirloom vault.” His eyes darted to the box in his hand. “A ring, I assume? You mean to propose.”

“I almost already did.” Draco trailed a finger along a shelf of tiaras, wondering idly when any of them had last left this underground prison for priceless things.

Theo seemed to consider that for a moment, tossing the box between his hands. Tension tightened Draco’s spine as he struggled to fathom why Theo hadn’t opened the box yet. Did he not realize he’d been brought along to provide an opinion?

“It’s been well over a year now. I’m surprised you waited this long,” Theo said, tossing the box back to Draco.

He caught it with ease, irrationally annoyed that Theo hadn't looked inside.

"Things were—are—always complicated." It was the best explanation Draco knew how to give.

Theo released an overly dramatic sigh, leaning against the closed vault door. "A true Romeo and Juliet, you two."

"Who?"

"Muggle Literature. Granger taught me."

The laugh that bubbled up Draco's throat startled him, unbidden, as images of *The Count of Monte Cristo* hurtled to the forefront of his mind.

"She's done the same to me. If she comes at you with anything by Alexander Dumas, run."

"Do your parents know?" Theo asked, sidestepping Draco's meager attempt at humor. He crossed his arms in front of his chest, eyes narrowed, head tilted, brow lifted. Everything about him screamed of suspicion. Draco didn't especially appreciate that look.

"Gods, you sound like Hermione."

"It's a valid question."

"I know." Draco snapped the box open, glanced at the ring inside, and snapped it shut again. "I know."

Theo didn't say anything, just kept watching him with an admirable posture that reminded Draco quite keenly of Blaise when he knew something the rest of them didn't.

Draco tossed the box to Theo who, once again, barely caught it.

"Everything with Hermione is complicated," Draco said, eyes fixed on the unopened box in Theo's hands. "But everything with my parents is downright impossible. I've taken maybe a handful of meals with them since my birthday."

"And how has that been?"

Draco knew he meant to ask about the meals with his parents, but all he could think about were the many, many more he'd spent with

Hermione.

“I enjoy having my mornings with her. I make better tea, and I can manage toast or eggs just fine.” A self-conscious crept up Draco's neck, hot and uncomfortable. If there were ever a person in the world Draco might dare to make such admissions to, Theo was that person. “She’s been cooking dinners. I get to start and end my days with her—it’s just—” he failed to articulate further, eyes landing on the box again: a pointed example of exactly how much he loved the things he spoke of.

“Well, I’m sure that’s how your parents feel about each other. And you. Isn’t that why your family has always done those regular meals?”

Sometimes, in the nooks and crannies between Theo jokes and his performances, wedged up against his cracks of sincerity and the other things Draco could never seem to get him to talk about, Theo had these bursts of understanding, so sympathetic that they honestly astounded Draco when they happened.

“I suppose,” Draco said. And he did. His parents enjoyed a routine of togetherness, had drilled as much into him throughout his life. It hurt, ached in Draco’s chest, to consider that the joy he got from his new routines with Hermione might bear any sort of resemblance to how his parents felt about him.

“So, are you planning on telling them?”

“I’ve agreed to have dinner with them tonight.”

“Does that work on Granger?” A sudden, sharp tone. “That’s not what I asked. Here, I’ll even clarify: are you going to ask their permission to use an heirloom?” He waggled the box in Draco’s general direction.

Draco’s lips thinned, pulled tight. He’d brought Theo along for assistance, for a bit of companionship, to share something exciting — *fuck*— life-changing, with his friend. He inhaled through flared nostrils, held the breath, then finally spoke.

“I don’t need their permission, Theo. A Malfoy heirloom belongs as much to me as it does to them.”

Theo rolled his eyes, brows lifted nearly to his hairline. “Apologies, orphan here. I’m a little rusty on the parental approval process on ancestral heirlooms.” Theo dropped his hands from how he’d been gesturing, rather forcefully, as he spoke. He tossed the box back to Draco. “You’re sure you have the right to your family heirlooms?”

Theo asked the question quietly, almost silently, as if he wished he didn't ask it at all.

"What does *that* mean?"

Theo sighed. "Just that—well, you don't really seem like you *want* to be much of a Malfoy heir."

"I don't want to be *their* kind of heir."

"Is there a choice?"

Draco snapped the velvet box open in his hands, took a breath, and snapped it shut again.

"Would you just provide an opinion on jewelry?"

Theo did. And without another word about Draco's parents, too.

—

Technically speaking, Draco exchanged more words with Topsy and Tilly over dinner that evening than he did with either of his parents. He hadn't meant it out of spite, or in any sort of defiant display flouting Lucius and Narcissa's traditional sensibilities. But when presented with the option of conversing with house elves or conversing with his parents, the elves quelled his anxieties where his parents did not.

He'd had dinner with them four times since his birthday.

Two meals had to be aborted halfway through the appetizer courses, lest the silent anger swallow him alive. Stares and silence were infinitely worse than awkward conversation, avoidance, or outright anger. The stares felt like judgment. The silence, damnation.

After each of those failed attempts to salvage what had started to look more and more like an unsalvageable thing, Draco went home to Hermione and fucked her as if his life depended on the depths to which he could prove his devotion. He poured his desperation into proving that he could maintain, protect, and appreciate at least one relationship in his life. They all seemed to crumble, seemed to break: brittle little things he snapped with just a touch too much pressure.

The third dinner he took with his parents included one stilted apology from Narcissa for how his birthday had panned out. Silence from Lucius.

Notably, the apology had been for the state of his birthday, not for the things that turned it into what it became. She apologized for no words, no actions, only the results—as if those things were entirely divorced from each other.

He stayed until he finished his entree, declined dessert, and left. When he held Hermione that night, he couldn't understand the cleaved feeling in his chest, cracking his breast bone in two. If he held her tight enough, close enough, he wondered if she could fit inside those spaces, fill the cracks herself.

"You shouldn't give up," she told him, lips taking his pulse at his neck as they lay in bed together.

"You, of all people, should not be advocating for them."

Her breath skittered up his neck, coasting around his ear and weaving its way into his hair. Warm and fresh like her muggle spearmint toothpaste. Intimate in a way that awed him sometimes, recognizing the sheer closeness required to feel someone else's breath on his skin.

"It's—a mess. I know," she said, running a hand up his chest and hitching a leg around his hip as they faced each other in the bed. "They keep saying and doing awful things, but—they also keep inviting you, even though they know about me. That must—it's progress, though perhaps reluctant. They don't want to lose you."

She kissed beneath his jaw: a bespoke incantation that sent shivers cascading through his nerves.

"I know you don't want to lose them, either. We can figure this out."

"So optimistic," he'd said, holding her tighter, filling the cracks.

The fourth dinner he had with his parents included a dessert service and an inconsequential conversation about how lovely raspberries and chocolate complimented each other. When he left, Narcissa told him she liked how he'd been styling his hair a bit longer.

Her eyes were watery when she said it.

Later, at home, when he kissed Hermione, she smiled. She told him he

tasted like a chocolate raspberry cake. He lifted her onto their kitchen counter, vanishing her knickers as he did, and told her, desperately, that he'd rather taste like her instead.

This fifth dinner, happening so shortly after pulling a ring from the Malfoy jewelry vault—a ring that now sat in his pocket as a reminder, a token of what this all was meant to be for—could be different. It had to be. If Hermione believed they could make progress, find hope in the hopeless, then he would choose to believe her. She was the smartest person he knew, after all.

Lucius and Narcissa greeted him at the Floo.

Lucius cleared his throat as Draco dusted a sparkling cinder of Floo powder from his trousers. “We’re pleased to have you here, son.”

Draco straightened. A deep breath. Strained words.

“I’m pleased to be here.”

“Are you?”

Narcissa’s arm shot out, viper fast until it found its target, laying a gentle hand on Lucius’s forearm.

“Enough,” she said. “We’d like to enjoy our evening. The elves have prepared a lovely six courses for us. Classic french cuisine. Your favorite, darling.”

Draco must have made a face, a slip of an expression where otherwise he meant to have none.

“Is that—not the case anymore?” she asked.

Such a simple question. But the passage of time, of space, of distance that it implied, of a divergence in paths, placed his preferences and her knowledge of them on opposite sides of the ever growing valley between them.

Draco put considerable effort into the smile he forced onto his face: a small, tight, insincere thing. But an attempt nonetheless.

“I’ve been partial to Italian cuisine recently.”

The smile his mother returned, much more elegant in its insincerity than his own, wedged its way inside his cracks and tried, fruitlessly, to fill them up.

As they walked to the dining room—his parents two paces ahead of him as he trailed behind, a reluctant dinner guest—Draco couldn't help but focus his every thought on the ring in his pocket, stretching his trouser fabric with every step. It felt like a tiny star he carried with him, a bright spot of hope from Hermione, *for* Hermione.

Topsy and Tilly greeted them in the dining room. He nodded to Topsy as she delivered a glass of wine to his seat.

"It's nice to see you, Topsy. Mopsy sends her regards." He missed having Topsy around, even if just to stock his flat with food. But autonomy and respect for working conditions—Hermione's words, not his—were the price he paid to keep his witch happy in their home.

Topsy flushed, stuttering her thanks, tiny hands grabbing at her drooping ears out of embarrassment.

Tilly appeared on his left with a *crack* and a warm towel for his hands.

"Tilly, thank you. Lovely to see you as well. Milly says hello from Nott Manor."

Tilly nearly dropped her tray of towels before squeaking her thanks and hurrying to his parents. When Draco looked up, gaze flicking from his mother to his father and back again, he found that they wore near-identical expressions of confusion, brows drawn tight.

Draco's mouth dropped open in preparation to defend himself, recognizing the struggle for comprehension on his parents' faces.

"Theo," he started. "He does this thing with the sibling elves between our manors. Just little bits of correspondence."

Narcissa took a long, slow sip of her wine. She held it by the glass, not by the stem, and that tiny break in protocol, especially for a white wine, felt important somehow. She set the glass down and looked at him, engaging in a rapid series of blinks as lines carved their way across her forehead, broadcasting her confusion.

"And—why?" she asked.

Draco tilted his head. He heard two *cracks* in rapid succession. Both Topsy and Tilly had disappeared.

"They enjoy it?" he said, not intending for it to sound so much like a question. "I—imagine it's nice? Hearing from their siblings at another

estate.”

Lucius made a derisive sort of sound into his Viognier.

Narcissa said nothing, made no noise at all.

They consumed five courses in silence, punctuated by *cracks* of elf magic, silver on china, and Draco’s new, rebellious insistence on establishing further correspondence between Topsy, Tilly, Mopsy, and Milly.

During dessert service, Narcissa finally said something. “You needn’t fuss so much over them, dear.”

It had been nearly a half hour and suddenly, there they were again, discussing house elves as if they’d never stopped.

But he supposed that was how it went. Carrying on dead conversations couldn’t be nearly as cumbersome as carrying on dead beliefs, and his parents had done *that* for years.

He felt sick. The inside of his mouth had a buttery, saturated quality to it, overindulged from rich foods and spite-driven conversations with elves. He thought of the ring in his pocket.

He knew he didn’t want their permission. He wouldn’t inform them of what he planned to do. They knew about Hermione and that would have to be enough. They knew how long they’d been together, roughly, at least. They knew she’d moved in with him several months prior. If they failed to divine from those obvious clues where his relationship with her was headed, then that was their own doing and he would not take responsibility for their intentional ignorance.

More than that, asking for permission to use the family heirlooms, heirlooms he *absolutely* had a right to whether they wanted to acknowledge it or not, felt like asking to continue his life in the way they saw fit. He had no intentions of doing anything of the sort.

He kept the ring in his pocket.

He kept chatting with Topsy and Tilly.

And he kept his questions to himself when his mother informed him that they were planning a gala at the manor to celebrate Hallowe’en.

He didn’t have to ask the questions anyway; he knew the answers.

Hermione would not be welcome, which meant he would not attend.

Draco loved few sounds on this earth as much as he enjoyed listening to Hermione attempting to withhold a sigh as she discovered yet *another* new biography stocked at her favorite little muggle bookstore. She turned, hair whipping in violent spirals as her hands found her hips. She leveled him with her best *how dare you Draco Malfoy* face, and he doubted he could love her any more if he tried.

“How much money have you paid this shop to source all these books? I’m *never* getting to Eliot.”

One of these days, he was going to convince her to let him fuck her right there, right up against that shelf she spent so much time sighing in front of, glaring at him from. He didn’t care if he had to buy the whole shop just to lock it up and give them some privacy, if that’s what it would take.

He shrugged, enjoying the undercurrent of foreplay involved in winding her up, irritating her just enough that she didn’t know whether she wanted to smack him or fuck him. He’d take either, honestly.

“Some,” he admitted. “I’m not sure, haven’t been keeping track.”

He had to stop himself, realizing he’d been tapping his forefinger against the box in his trouser pocket: his constant companion in the form of precious jewelry. He just had to survive another hour or so of book browsing before he could take her to their dinner reservation at their favorite little Italian restaurant. There, in the middle of muggle London, with a Malfoy family heirloom, he would propose to this woman and promise her, officially and permanently, everything he had.

The meeting of muggle and magical felt right, felt important, and he hoped she thought so, too. He’d asked no one for permission: not his father, not hers. He’d thrown every tradition he knew of out the window, except for the ring itself. Their life together would be *theirs*, and no one else’s.

The idea of it all both emboldened and terrified him. His father didn't get a say in this. If Draco never started the disagreement, never included him in it to begin with, then Lucius couldn't win.

Hermione sighed again, hands dropping from her hips. She turned and pulled two more books from the shelf, forcing them into Draco's hands. She'd informed him long ago that if he insisted on stocking so many books she'd have to read, he bore the responsibility of carrying them for her. Not her soundest logic, but he complied regardless, a devoted follower to her word.

"Well. I suppose I'll be excellent for obscure biographical facts for famous persons whose surnames start with the letter E in pub trivia."

Draco hummed a sound of acknowledgement, distracted by the weight in his pocket and the drop of anxiety he should probably call anticipation in his throat.

"Though I suppose, we'd have to actually go to a pub trivia with Harry and Ginny to put my skills to use."

He hummed again, eyes searching for a clock somewhere in the shop with them. They had a very important reservation to keep.

She stepped into his line of sight, a brow lifted, hands back on her hips.

"Yes, darling, you'll be fantastic," he said, hoping it was the response she sought.

She let out a frustrated sound of protest. "That's not—what's wrong with you?"

The annoyance in her tone brought his full attention back to her. Not tonight. Not on this date. He wanted intentional irritation, the kind that wound her up. He didn't want irritation he didn't control, not the kind that could sour this day, not when he had such wonderful things planned.

"What do you mean?" he asked in an attempt at devastating nonchalance.

"You're acting odd." She tapped the cover on one of the books he held, narrowing her eyes at him.

"I am not."

She let out a hollow laugh. “If you insist.”

“I do.”

“I think I know you well enough to know when you’re in a mood.”

“I am not in a mood.”

She laughed again, but not in a cruel sort of way that would normally make Draco bristle; he hated being laughed at. Hermione’s laugh, even if she was *technically* laughing at him, always had an edge of fondness, of kindness. Her laugh sidled up beside his lingering insecurities and said *it’s okay to laugh, too*. In this instance, however, he did not. Instead, he scowled: an attempt to double down on his refutation.

“You’re being evasive, nervous. Like that time you tried to give me a ruby necklace out of nowhere—”

Draco *felt* himself blanching, blood draining from his face as he resisted the impulse towards a quick, surprised inhale. She didn’t notice at first, still prattling on about his comparative quietness when normally he’d be mercilessly teasing her about the new books she had to buy. She caught his stiffness eventually, though, because she stopped, confusion and intuition battling in her features, analyzing his reaction.

“Draco?”

He hummed to acknowledge having heard her as he watched as a muscle in her neck jumped from the tension it snapped down her spine.

“About—family heirlooms. You’re not”—she swallowed through a cough—“planning on giving me any, are you?”

What else could Draco do but sidestep such a question?

“Well—I did warn you I would. Eventually.”

“*Eventually.*”

“Eventually.”

She blinked, tilting her head. She opened her mouth to say something else and Draco experienced a distinct, visceral fear that she was about to ruin everything with that beautiful mouth and terrible brain of

hers. He rushed to cut her off.

“If I was considering it”—the words practically fell out of his mouth—“it’s been over a year. Since the last time—”

“—Barely over a year—”

“—and we’d been together *in some capacity* for months before that. It’s a long time to be with someone.”

“I was with Ron for over three years.”

Draco sucked in a breath. He twisted, setting the books he held on a nearby shelf, haphazardly shoving them in sideways, on top of several others being properly displayed. Even in the midst of this conversation, intense as it was, he saw Hermione’s focus flicker, stuck on proper reshelving procedures.

“Please don’t compare us,” Draco begged for what felt like the thousandth time in his life. He knew she didn’t do it on purpose, but she did it all the same. Everything could be broken down to a compare and contrast for Hermione Granger’s impressive brain. “Three years is—an offensive amount of time for him to keep you in waiting.”

“In waiting?” Her tone pitched higher, question ascending in her vocal cords.

“For a proposal.”

“I thought we weren’t comparing?”

“We’re not.”

“I don’t know what kind of antiquated pureblood customs you ascribe to but three years is”—a pause—“reasonable.”

“But not enough? Or enough that you knew?” Where Hermione’s tone had lifted, his dropped. The edge in it, bordering on anger, shredded his hope for their evening, leaving gaping flaps where doubt could soar through.

“He did propose.”

Draco had to take a step back, a stagger under that axis-shifting piece of information.

“He *what?*”

“I said no.”

Clearly.

Obviously.

Gods.

“This isn’t about Ron,” she said, voice gentler. She matched the step he’d taken with her own. “It’s not that I don’t—that I wouldn’t—Draco, *I love you*. I love you even though you keep having this shop stock more and more books so you can win a silly bet we made years ago.”

She wrapped her fingers around his left wrist. More intimate than his forearm. Less intimate than his hand. A middle ground.

“I just don’t think *now* is the right time,” she said, a whisper. “*If* you were considering giving me more jewelry.”

How could one woman possibly have the ability to so effectively break him apart and then pull him back together again? He reached out, put his hand over hers, lifted it to his lips. He watched as her eyes widened, then fluttered shut, just for a moment.

“I don’t want your life to be in constant contention with your parents. I still think we could find a way to coexist.” She brought her other hand to his face, fingers sweeping a lock of his hair behind his ear, not dissimilar to how he so often did the same with her. “I don’t much cherish the idea of making nice with Lucius”—a strained expression—“but I can be civil. Mature. And I know your relationship with them is complicated. I don’t want to make it any more so than I already have.”

“I don’t care, Hermione.” She blinked up at him. “I don’t care what they think,” he said. “I don’t care what they’re ready for. It’s our life, not theirs. *Ours*.”

She pulled her hand away, smile dropping.

“I trust that you *believe* that. But I worry it won’t actually be the case. I think it would catch up to you; you’d regret or resent the fallout that breaking your relationship with them any further would cause.”

The ring in his pocket felt like the heaviest stone known to man, weighing him down, dragging him into the earth. He watched her

face, waiting to see if she had any other ruthless assessments to layer onto her already vicious analysis.

He exhaled, breath heavy, heart exhausted.

He turned, pulling her books from the shelf again. He glanced at the titles and then nodded towards the checkout.

“You know a lot, Hermione. But you don’t know everything.”

She didn’t respond as she followed him to pay for the books.

Chapter End Notes

my eternal thanks to the best team around: [icepower55](#), [Endless_musings](#), and [persephone_stone](#)!

and thank you to everyone so much for reading! i realize i sound like a record on repeat every single update, but it's truly such a gift to get to interact with readers (even if i don't manage to respond on all the comments here! I'm sorry! but i read them all!) whether it's here on ao3, on tumblr, on discord, on facebook, or wherever else! thank you thank you thank you so much for being here! i appreciate you SO much!

Chapter 32: -.500, -.583, -.666

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

August

tick tock tick tock

Draco put the ring away. He took it back to the vault—not in an act of symbolic permanence, but mostly to prevent Hermione from finding it in one of her bouts of reorganization. She had a tendency towards filling the rare blank spaces in her planner with persistent productivity, a restless requirement that she organize a random drawer as she waited for the kettle to boil, or dispose of expired soaps and shampoos while her shower water warmed. As time passed, as she grew more comfortable in the home they shared, she ventured out of her spaces and started inserting herself into his, too.

The books on your nightstand weren't in any sort of order. I alphabetized them for you.

Several of your potions ingredients were nearing their expiration dates. I ordered replacements for you.

And so on and so on: tiny incursions on his lifestyle that should have irritated him. Instead, he found it oddly comforting—endearing, even—that she cared so much about the state of his life that she took the initiative to make it better. Though, it didn't bother him that his books weren't alphabetized. He kept them in order of publication date, as potioneering advances tended to build upon each other. He didn't have the heart to tell her such a thing when she'd kissed him on the cheek and told him she'd alphabetized them instead.

With such a relentless organizer living in his midst, he returned the ring to his family vault and temporarily set it out of his mind. Instead, he focused his efforts on figuring out what requirements their relationship lacked that would propel them from *not ready* to *ready* for the next step.

“Are you ready?” Hermione asked, stepping out of the bathroom as she struggled to clasp a necklace.

He'd been leaning against the fireplace, prepared for their dinner at the Potter's for the last several minutes as she fought with her hair. He'd stopped offering his assistance in the high humidity months—her irritation with her frizz ran deeper than logic, and she'd threatened to hex him once when he offered her use of his smoothing potions should she fancy them. She did not, it seemed, fancy them. *So fucking stubborn.*

He met her halfway between the bathroom and where he stood, taking over the job of clasping her necklace. She sighed, allowing him to help as she turned within the circle his arms had created around her. She pulled her mass of curls to the side; he failed to suppress his chuckles as her hair almost prevented the clasp from meeting at the base of her neck. He pulled her curls free when he finished, lips brushing her exposed neck as the opportunity presented itself so easily, so freely, just there.

"We should go," she said. He hummed against her skin. "We shouldn't keep a heavily pregnant woman waiting," she added, leaning against him nevertheless.

He pulled back. "I suppose you're right. We wouldn't want you to lose your godmother status for such an offense."

She turned: smiling, laughing, happy. He watched as she walked to the Floo, grabbed a pinch of powder from the mantel, and tossed it in the grate. For that short series of seconds his life felt entirely unreal: a wild, unbelievable world wherein the sound of Hermione Granger's laughter sent warmth blooming from the center of his chest, filling him with an impossible supply of Patronus-worthy thoughts.

Draco shook himself. If he looked so directly at such a perfect gift for too long, analyzed it too closely, he worried he'd find the cracks, the backdoor to the wards that would let the nightmares back in. He'd had far too many nightmares in his life. He much preferred the dreams.

He let her pull him through the Floo, to Harry Potter's home, where the dream continued, beautiful and undisturbed.

“Don’t you think you’re cutting this all a bit close?” Draco asked over dinner, sipping his wine and lobbing a smirk in the Weaslette’s direction, as close to an insult as he could bring himself to sling at a woman solidly nine months pregnant.

She narrowed her eyes instantly.

“Look, Ferret. Which of us is the professional Quidditch player here? If anyone is annoyed that my due date is irritatingly close to the World Cup, it’s me.” She released a breath, winced, and leaned a bit to the left.

Potter mumbled something that sounded suspiciously like, “Me, too,” through a bite of roasted potatoes.

Weaslette’s gaze snapped to Potter. Draco held back a snort of amusement at seeing Potter in trouble with his wife. Hermione pinched his elbow in what he assumed was meant as a rebuke, but her own smirk forced its way to the surface of her face.

“Don’t you dare, Harry James Potter. This child has a vendetta against my spleen. I cannot even express how ready I am to evict him, *but* I am intentionally trying to will him to wait another week. That way *I*—not you—can go to the cup after missing last year because *you* had a huge case.”

Potter lifted his palms in supplication, fork still in one hand, a potato falling pitifully back onto his plate.

“Well if *someone* hadn’t been so put out that her team didn’t even make it into the qualifiers the year before last—”

“Potter,” Draco cut in. Perhaps this act of goodwill would satisfy the life debt he owed. “I’m fairly certain there are rules against arguing with pregnant women. Ginny is inherently correct, in everything she says, when she’s carrying your child.”

The Weaslette burst into laughter across the table from him.

“—used my name,” she said between laughs. “What fine aristocratic manners, *gods*.” Hermione seemed to find it funny, too, amusement held in her shoulders as they shook just slightly from the giggling she appeared determined not to give into.

Potter, at his end of the table, grumbled something that Draco couldn’t discern over the sound of being laughed at. He rolled his

eyes, shook his head, and sipped his Pinot as Potter lifted his voice.

“You ought to be a little more invested in this timing, Malfoy,” he said, gesturing towards his wife. “Hermione says you have tickets to the cup, too. Do you think you’re going to get her to go with you if Ginny is in labor? Or has just had our kid, *her* godchild?”

Draco shrugged, draping a casual arm around the back of Hermione’s chair. “My friends are going. I’ll just spend time with them.”

Hermione did not hesitate to smack his leg beneath the table. He’d been expecting it, knew he’d earn some display of her irritation with that comment, and as such, didn’t so much as blink when her palm made contact with the side of his thigh. He tilted his head towards her, a slow smile spreading across his face.

“You wouldn’t really go without me and miss this, would you?” Her question seemed caught between genuine inquiry and performative snark for the benefit of her friends.

He shoved away his disappointment at the touch of doubt he heard.

He indulged in an overly dramatic eye roll, the sort of eye roll that only the likes of Theodore Nott could get away with in normal conversation. Here, with Hermione, it would tell her everything she needed to know about exactly how serious he had been.

“They’re *your* friends, Granger. Although, I’ll admit that Ginny has grown on me—primarily owing to her taste in red wine.” He lifted his glass in a silent toast.

“Flaunt it some more, Malfoy. My hospitality has its limits. I could give you the swill Harry suggests every time you visit.”

He lifted a brow in her direction. She lifted her own right back. Her gaze slipped to the glass in his hand, then to the water in hers.

“What I would give for a Cabernet. Or a Zinfandel. Or that Pinot—just right there.” She looked perilously close to snatching Harry’s glass out from under him before she twisted her lips into a frown and blew out a breath, sending a sheet of red hair flying away from her face.

In a reluctant, dark, terribly embarrassed corner of Draco’s consciousness, he hated to admit that he didn’t mind his social engagements with the Potters these days. This particular dinner had added palatability owing to the absence of one Ronald Weasley.

As if willed into existence by his thoughts, Hermione asked about Ron and Lavender.

“—back for the cup? Are they meeting you there?”

Potter nodded, “Straight from America to Italy.”

“I wonder if he’s going to propose,” Weaslette asked with a wistful sort of look at Potter.

Draco didn’t like how he tensed: chest, shoulders, neck, back. It took several seconds for him to identify why, and she sat right next to him. The question of Ron Weasley proposing to someone, knowing that he’d once proposed to Hermione, that she’d declined, and that she didn’t want Draco to propose, either—at least not yet—sent a tension coursing through him, pulling muscle fibers taut.

He realized that Hermione’s hand sat idly, easily, on his leg. Had it been there since her playful slap? Or had she just put it there? Either way, the pressure, the weight of it, didn’t so much as shift at the mention of Weasley potentially proposing. She just shrugged at Ginny’s question, as did Potter: a quick moment, nowhere near as intrusive as it felt inside Draco’s head.

He covered her hand with his, perpetually astonished by the ease of casual touch, of organic conversation, of meals that—even when served by Harry Potter—brought so much more enjoyment than the stark, regimented routine enforced by his parents.

—

Four days later, Draco sat at his parents’ table, a meal meant as a concession before he spent a week in Italy with Hermione. First at the cup, then just *together*: a trip through the countryside she’d wanted to take for most of her life but had never had the chance.

It seemed polite, if nothing else, to engage in a dinner with his parents, formal and stunted and awful as they were, before he disappeared for a week. Short of the Weaslette going into labor, he intended to accept no owls, respond to no firecalls, engage with nothing and no one besides Hermione and whatever bed they found themselves in, in whatever Italian city they travelled through.

He kept expecting for the tension at the table to ease, for his parents to find something to talk about that didn't touch on any of the varied, forbidden topics between them. But dinner with his parents continued to feel like an exercise in silence, a quiet punishment for having said too much before.

Objectively, the food was of much higher quality than that he'd been served at the Potters'. The ingredients, the technique, all of it technically surpassed that other meal. Yet, he'd enjoyed his experience at Grimmauld Place so much more. Draco almost felt guilty, knowing that the elves had likely worked for hours to pull yet another multiple course meal together, only for it to be consumed in near-silence. It simply didn't *taste* right. It had that same lingering sourness that many of his experiences in the manor had.

A headache pressed against Draco's sinuses, pressure prickling into pain. He felt stuck on repeat, a strange sense of rolling repetition in the meals with his parents, a routine he once loved. With each iteration, however, they grew less and less palatable.

Narcissa said something about coming back for breakfasts in the future.

"Honestly darling, it does not do to laze about in the morning." She sliced a cooked carrot on her plate. Careful, precise movements, as cautious as her words. "One should start the day with a good meal and vibrant conversation."

He watched as she brought the bite to her lips: chewed, swallowed, smiled.

"I'm hardly lazing, Mother. I'm still starting my day with a meal and vibrant conversation."

At the end of the table, out of Draco's periphery, he heard the *thunk* of silver hitting the table, muffled by the tablecloth. Silence swallowed them whole.

Draco knew both his parents had no misconceptions as to what he'd meant. He'd flaunted Hermione by glancing mention in front of them once again. The passing beats of silence counted the depths of their disappointment. Draco couldn't bring himself to care.

Narcissa diverted, redirected, steered the conversation elsewhere as if they could simply will the Hermione issue out of existence. Draco might have laughed if not for the exhaustion biting at his bones,

gnawing.

“And you’ll be gone this weekend?”

With a sigh, “Yes. Much of next week, too.” Draco dared a glance at his father, seated at the head of the table. “With the match on Saturday, we were planning on spending the rest of the weekend and some of next week enjoying Italy.”

Draco saw it, the moment Lucius’s comprehension caught on the word *we*. The muscles around his eyes tightened, knuckles around the stem of his wine glass whitening from pressure. Draco expected no other response from his flaunting, from such a casual, careless almost-mention of Hermione. But it disappointed him all the same. Every time, without fail. He couldn’t shake the hope that maybe, this time, the shock would ease, the distaste would waver, and acceptance would sneak in.

Lucius’s mouth pressed thin, gaze locked with Draco’s.

“I do hope you enjoy Italy,” he said with absolutely no conviction. If anything, Lucius’s tone suggested that he hoped for bad weather, portkey problems, and a touch of food poisoning.

Draco looked down at his plate. He had enough of that here.

“It’s been so long since we’ve travelled there,” Narcissa added, voice overly wistful in what felt like a painful attempt to counterbalance Lucius’s tone. “Perhaps we ought to visit again, this winter?”

Many moments in Draco’s complicated history with Hermione had been very, very poorly timed.

Meeting her as a child, parroting the things his father said, thinking they made him sound powerful and impressive when they only made him cruel. That memory tasted like regret.

Crossing paths with her at the last Quidditch World Cup he’d attended, just before Death Eaters, his father among them, turned the sporting event into a dangerous political message. That, too, tasted of regret.

Standing in the manor’s drawing room, not quite capable of avoiding the issue of her identity, or of doing anything to prevent the terrible pain dealt to her on that day. That regret tasted so sour, so vile, that it never truly left him.

But seeing her Patronus swim through Malfoy Manor's austere stone walls as if they were nothing but a calm pool of water? That tasted of relief, perfectly timed.

The silver otter swam through the air, twisting playfully as it did a circle around his chair before coming to rest in front of him, sitting on Narcissa Malfoy's fine china. Through the semi-opaque silver creature, Draco watched his mother frown.

More importantly, he felt himself smiling. He could have called the Patronus poorly-timed: interrupting a meal with his parents, making the thing they'd been avoiding unavoidable. But the relief it brought him—the sheer, stupid joy of it—was the most perfectly timed in thing in the world. Until, of course, it spoke.

Hermione's voice echoed through the dining room, reverberations catching on even the farthest corners as her words came out in a rush, too loud, spoken in a panic.

"I'm sorry," she said, through the otter: breathless, beautiful even though he couldn't see her. A nervous, manic sort of giggle followed her apology. He heard her clear her throat. "It's Ginny. She's gone into labor. Harry said the baby is coming fast. I'm heading to St. Mungo's now"—a pause—"meet me there?" The question in her tone, the uncertainty, it hurt.

Silence followed. A new silence, a different silence that sounded of broken barriers and irrefutable truths. The otter didn't dissipate. Draco counted several breaths before—

"I apologize for interrupting your dinner, Mr. and Mrs. Malfoy. I know how much they mean to you."

The otter finally vanished.

Draco laughed.

—

Draco left dinner with his parents almost as soon as the Patronus vanished. He barely spared a second thought for the fact that he would not get to attend the Quidditch World Cup. Still, he arrived too

late: delayed by Topsy trying to send food home with him, Crookshanks insisting on being fed the moment he stepped through the Floo, and the incomprehensibly long wait for his visitor's badge at the hospital. By the time Draco stepped off the lift into St. Mungo's maternity ward, he faced an actual, literal, inconceivable horde of redheads all swarming the corridor outside the Weaslette's room.

The visual disorientation alone set Draco's teeth on edge: so much red, so many freckles. Then there was the *noise*. Evidently several members of the Weasley brood had already started breeding, populating the corridor with redheads, redhead hybrids, and so, so many voices: talking, crying, screaming. Shoes slapping on linoleum. Sneezing, snotty faces. And then there was Draco, in Italian wool and french cuffs. Bright blond in a sea of ginger.

Well, not entirely a sea of ginger.

Draco stiffened as Lavender threw her arms around him in a quick, far too excited hug. Her blond waves whipped behind her as she turned to announce his arrival to the swarm. Draco would have preferred to maintain whatever marginal anonymity he had when the Weasleys pretended he did not exist.

Lavender rounded on him again.

"Ron and I got here not long ago as well—had to grab an emergency international portkey." She smiled, huge and knowing. "Ron didn't believe me."

Draco almost didn't want to ask. "Believe you?"

"That the baby would be early. The tea leaves said so—certain of an early birth. I *told* him our trip to New York would interfere. But the shop paid for the portkey because of his work thing so he *insisted* we take advantage of it." She sighed, not even sounding remotely annoyed.

Draco nearly laughed. Hermione would have had his head for such a thing, and he'd have deserved it.

"They're in the room now," Lavender added. "Ron and Hermione."

Draco glanced at the door surrounded by various loitering Weasleys.

"Everyone else has had at least one turn with them, I think," Lavender said from beside him. When he tilted his head to look at her, she had

the most peculiar, expectant sort of look on her face.

“I don't—” he started. “I'm not—I'm just here for Hermione.”

As if spoken into existence, the door to Ginny's room opened, and Hermione stepped out. She smiled, looking around, flushed and excited and *happy*. Draco wished he had a camera to capture that look on her face, knowing it showed a very specific kind of joy: new to him, possibly new to her, too.

Her smile, impossibly, grew when her eyes landed on him. He'd been trapped and he didn't even realize it. Lavender gave him a tiny shove forward as Hermione reached out and encircled his wrist with her hands, pulling him towards the door.

Discomfort reared its head, a garrote choking him at the collar. He felt misplaced, out of sync, *wrong* in the same way he'd felt the first time he'd been forced to associate with Hermione's friends. He'd gotten used to them, but it had taken two long years to desensitize himself to the people who'd once so terribly agitated him. But this sort of moment, such a personal, axis-shifting sort of experience: he had no place in it.

It was like being at the Leaky all over again. For the first time in well over a year, Occlumency called to him, a desperate attempt to escape, to defend, to survive the unsurvivable. Because there could be no version of reality in which Harry Potter had any interest in letting Draco around his newborn child.

He slipped by Ron Weasley leaving the room as Hermione dragged Draco into it. The door clicked shut behind him; he noticed four distinct things.

First, Potter looking fucking exhausted.

Second, Weaslette looked even more exhausted.

Third, they both look obscenely, criminally happy.

And fourth, that wrongness he'd felt had slipped out the door with Ron. Draco felt oddly welcome, and that almost unsettled him more than the alternative.

After a brief moment of shock, Draco locked eyes with Potter, then the Weaslette.

“Congratulations Potters,” he said, eyes landing on the small bundle he could only assume was a newborn child cradled in Potter’s arms.

Weaslette laughed.

“Have you run out of hair potion, Ferret? You look positively unkempt. Plebeian, if I had to put a word to it.”

Draco blinked. Then, he narrowed his eyes: child in Potter’s arms, Weaslette in the bed.

He arched a brow.

“Have you slept this century, Weaslette? The bags under your eyes might have more carrying capacity than Hermione’s little beaded monstrosity.”

She held his gaze, a beat of silence, then, she laughed. Draco allowed himself a smirk. Beside him, he heard Hermione sigh. When he turned, she shook her head with a tired sort of patience, but laced her fingers with his own.

She squeezed, a comforting pulse against his palm. Draco squeezed back, realizing too late that he’d been giving her permission.

She leveled Potter with a pointed stare.

Potter did his best to arch a brow back at her, but he seemed to struggle with the expression, everything about his face sluggish and a bit stupid. With a sigh, Potter took a step towards them, bundle in his arms held a little less tightly to his chest.

“Would you like to hold him, Malfoy?”

Draco wondered how many conversations had come to pass between Hermione and Potter in order to culminate in this moment. Potter looked a few seconds from putting his newborn child in Draco’s arms after what had only been minimal hesitation.

“No. No thank you, Potter,” Draco said, shifting back. He lifted his hands, a kind of defensive posture. “I try not to handle other people’s valuables. Liability concerns.”

Hermione laughed, intercepting.

“I’ll take his turn, then.”

And as if it were the easiest thing in the world, Hermione took the child, who Draco should probably start calling James, knowing his name and all. A real name for a real, new person. But very little inside that hospital room felt especially real. From the cohabitating exhaustion and joy on the Potters' faces to the image of Hermione holding a baby.

Draco took a cautious step towards her, finally catching sight of the tiny, pink-skinned human in her arms: raw, and swaddled, and so terribly fragile looking. Draco almost reached out, the muscles in his left arm tensing as they prepared to lift and rotate and reach to touch a finger to the impossibly tiny hand flexing open and closed from where it had escaped its blankets.

He felt calm. Strangely, oddly, peacefully so. His eyes travelled from James's face—pink, a bit squished, and not *entirely* human-looking yet—to Hermione's—awestruck, beautiful, if a little unsure of herself. She swayed, an easy motion in her hips, entirely focused on the child in her arms.

Distantly, Draco realized that Potter had taken a seat beside Ginny's bed and that both of them were watching Hermione, just as Draco did.

His chest panged, something reverberating off his ribs, a longing he couldn't quite place. The way Hermione doted and beamed, staring at a newborn child, struck him with a sense of rightness, so keenly on the heels of the *wrongness* that had felt so certain mere minutes before. She looked at James Potter as if she'd never seen something so miraculous in her entire life.

And it suited her.

Draco had never thought of Hermione as especially maternal. Not as a slight to her womanhood, but it just—never seemed relevant.

But the more he looked, watching her reverence, the more he understood it. He took a small step closer, so tiny that his dragonhide shoes never fully lifted off the linoleum floors. Really, it had been more of a shuffle. Narcissa Malfoy would have been appalled.

He watched a curl tumble over Hermione's shoulder. She'd let it grow out, grow longer, spirals past her shoulder blades now. The curl fell almost perfectly into James's tiny hand: it opened, it closed. Hermione made a sound, straddling the line between shock and amusement. Draco took another cautious step closer.

Such a tiny person, barely born, and already he knew to hold tight to the precious things life handed him.

Draco had never really thought about children before. Not too closely, at least. A thought struck him, wild in how obvious and yet utterly insane it seemed.

He'd dined with the Potters on Monday. There had been two of them, then. And now—

He watched as James opened and closed his tiny hand again, curl expanding and contracting in his grip.

Three.

The Potters had walked into St. Mungo's as two people and when they left there would be three. Could that really be how that worked? It had to be how that worked. *Obviously*, that was how it worked. But it was madness, too. Magic. This little thing in Hermione's arms: magic made life.

James had been nothing. No one. And now he *was*.

Draco's throat had gone dry. He swallowed against a foreign, intrusive, overwhelming sensation of *want* bubbling low in his throat, stemming from his chest.

Heirs had always been an abstract thing to him: an indistinct, indefinable future state that his future self would deal with. They were a duty. Never a want.

He could see it now, and it ripped through his chest with so much want that Draco had to wonder if the others in the room could see it as well. He gave into the impulse and lifted his hand, offering his index finger in place of Hermione's curl. Dimly, he wondered how long it had been since he'd taken his eyes off this baby, off *Hermione* with this baby.

Another image gripped him. Hermione with *his* baby. *Their* baby. An heir. It didn't feel so abstract anymore. In fact, it felt like simple maths. Him, with her. Two becoming three.

He swallowed, the motion dragging against his dry, aching throat. James's tiny grip pulsed against his fingertip. Draco forced himself to look up, to look away, lest he lose himself in this strange, sinew-twisting want.

“I suppose we have Potter to thank for saving us all from having to deal with another redhead.”

It was half insult, all instinct.

Potter stood, approached, and clapped Draco on the shoulder with a casual familiarity they definitely *did not* share. And then Potter laughed. He laughed, and laughed, and laughed, hovering too close behind Draco, peering over his shoulder at the dark-haired bundle in Hermione's arms.

“Yep,” Potter said, hand still resting, inexplicably, on Draco's shoulder. “That was all me.”

Chapter End Notes

y'all know the drill by now. [icepower55](#), [Endless_musings](#), and [persephone_stone](#) deserve ALL the love for their continued work on this story with me!

in an effort not to sound like broken record of effusive thank yous, a special thanks this week to all my fellow nerds having the most outstanding character discussions in the comments. it's such a joy seeing such thoughtful, interesting analyses of something I've written...it's like, an actual dream. but also, general effusive thanks to everyone reading, whether you're commenting or not, i appreciate you all so much!!!

Chapter 33: -.416, -.500, -.583

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

September

tick tock tick tock

“I can’t remember if we said we were meeting out in the square or inside the museum.”

Draco knew Hermione spoke mostly to herself, but he couldn’t resist the impulse to respond, an attempt at problem solving. Anything, really, to accelerate his departure from the extremely crowded square in the middle of muggle London where they stood, potentially waiting in the wrong place to meet Hermione’s parents.

“Did you not write it down in your planner?”

She huffed an annoyed breath, clearly a *no*.

He tried a different approach.

“Well, if we don’t see them here, perhaps we could try the museum? It is—very crowded here.”

“It’s a bit of a tourist destination and we’re”—she blew out a breath, shifting her weight as she craned her head around—“well, we’re in a very central area. Oh—I see them across—yes, they’re headed into the museum—”

She grabbed his hand and pulled him through the crowds, across crosswalks—which felt a bit like narrowly cheating death—and towards the art museum where Hermione wanted to spend her birthday afternoon with her parents.

Muggle spaces didn’t disorient Draco nearly as much as they used to, but there were occasions—like this one—where the sheer quantity of people crammed into a public space seemed impossible, or at least improbable. It reminded him of his first few days at Hogwarts; no amount of knowledge he’d had before going to the school could truly

prepare him for all the intricacies of shifting staircases, trick doors, and labyrinthian architectural choices.

Navigating through the sheer number of bodies in muggle London felt a bit like that. Put Draco in a crowded ballroom on a Sacred Twenty-Eight estate and he knew which stairs might have false bottoms, which portraits hid secret passages. He knew no such secrets about how the muggle world worked.

With the mystery of where to meet Hermione's parents settled, and the din from the square fading behind them, Draco could admit that Hermione's choice of afternoon entertainment wasn't without its merits.

He liked art well enough. Malfoy Manor had plenty of it decorating its walls and corridors. Though, he decided he liked watching Hermione enjoy art more than he liked the art itself. She did a lot of gasping, little noises escaping her lips as something very literally stole her breath. She didn't even realize she did it; the first time he'd brought it up she simply swatted his arm and told him he wasn't allowed to make fun of her on her birthday.

Draco spent a good portion of his afternoon walking with Mrs. Granger as they trailed behind Hermione and her father.

"Art isn't your preference?" Draco asked as they watched their respective Grangers taking in a particularly vibrant installation.

"I enjoy it as much as the average person, I assume." She nodded towards Hermione and Mr. Granger. "Those two, though, everything interests them. Haven't found the limit yet to what they want to learn or how much they can love."

Mrs. Granger glanced at a statue looming nearby. Draco assumed it had been sculpted with exceptional skill, that it bore qualities of fine art, objectively speaking. He just didn't see much worth marveling at beyond an initial look.

"I'm more the sort of person who has one thing that I love, and I love it very fiercely." She looked away from the sculpture. "I don't *love* art."

Draco found he couldn't quite tear his focus from Hermione's face as she chatted animatedly with her father, some wild analysis of the painting in front of them, to be sure.

“Neither do I,” he said.

Mrs. Granger smiled, and it felt like an entirely different, completely silent conversation had passed between them. One wherein art had nothing to do with anything being said.

—

Only a lifetime of etiquette tutors prevented Draco from spitting his drink back into his cup.

“You don’t like it?” Hermione looked up at him with a face of genuine disappointment. Her choice of tiny sandwich shop for their lunch after the museum had seemed decently promising, but now, Draco had new doubts about how much he would enjoy his meal.

“It’s carbonated. Like a beer.”

“Yes, I told you that. This is a fizzy drink.”

“It’s sweet. Sweeter than pumpkin juice. Gods, Hermione, how can you stand this?”

Across the table, both Hermione’s parents laughed.

“Well, you’re earning excellent goodwill from my parents, talking like that.”

He lifted his brows. “Oh?”

“It’s horrid for your teeth,” Mrs. Granger said.

Draco twisted towards Hermione. “You subject yourself to this tooth-destroying nightmare because...?”

“I was only ever allowed one on my birthday. I figured while we were here, I might as well indulge. I don’t have them normally—”

“A smart choice, dear,” Mr. Granger cut in. He switched his attention to Draco. “Did you enjoy the exhibit?”

From his periphery, Draco could have sworn he saw Mrs. Granger’s mouth quirk—just a touch—towards a smile.

“The—quantity of art was certainly impressive. To have so much of it in one place—where does it all come from?” he asked.

Several shrugs rotated around the table.

“Donations, I think,” Hermione supplied. “Willed from estates, wars. Stuff like that.”

“I can’t imagine most old wizarding families would want to give their precious art away. How unusual.”

Hermione jumped in, head tilting, mouth turned to a thoughtful smile as she picked up the threads of his thought and continued with them. “I suppose now that I think on it, most old estates are their own sorts of museums. Malfoy Manor certainly is.”

It wasn’t necessarily that anyone said anything, or that there was a sharp intake of breath, or any other typical indications of surprise. But Draco saw the posture at the table shift, only just, as Hermione’s parents heard, understood, and reacted to what she’d just said.

Draco glanced across the table to find Mr. Granger’s brows lifted above his glasses frames. “Manor?” he asked, something of a teasing smile on his face. “Your family has a manor—an estate?”

Draco cleared his throat. He’d never, in all his life, felt uncomfortable about that fact before. The closest he’d ever come were the times when he and Hermione had struggled to balance her want to financially contribute to their living situation with his complete disinterest in taking money from her—he’d always had plenty of his own. But something about their less-than-spacious booth in a crowded restaurant made that status, that inextricable part of who he was, feel—judged.

“Ah—yes. We do. We are a very old wizarding family as you may”—he glanced at Hermione, who shifted her head just enough that he knew she intended it as a shake to the negative—“or may not know.” He tried to suppress the tension in his chest, torn between an impulse to brag that he could probably buy the whole bloody restaurant if he wanted to, and shouting that he couldn’t help it, *he couldn’t*. He’d been born to the family he’d been born to.

The money felt like both a gift and a burden, depending on the day.

Hermione’s mother released a short laugh. “I suppose that explains the manners—”

“—and the posture,” Mr. Granger added.

Draco blinked away the sensation of being under inspection.

“I—the what?”

“Well you are very posh, aren’t you?”

“I—yes?”

They wouldn’t know it, based on Draco’s sudden inability to speak a sentence without stumbling over his words.

Hermione just nodded in agreement, giggling into her disgustingly sweet, fizzing drink. The tension in Draco’s chest morphed, a transfiguration from judgment to joke.

“We’re just kidding with you, darling,” Mrs. Granger said. For a moment, she sounded just like Narcissa—the same term of endearment and everything. But from brown eyes, olive skin, and chestnut hair, the whole sentence colored differently. “It isn’t as if Hermione hasn’t had a comfortable life, herself.”

“We’ve done well for ourselves,” Mr. Granger said. “Not *manor* well, but she’s not had to want for anything.”

Draco wasn’t sure when Hermione’s hand had found his beneath the table, but she squeezed it so tightly he started to worry she might break a bone. It took him several seconds to understand why, as he watched her parents smiling, unaware, across the table from them.

She’d wanted for plenty in her time spent without them. He wondered if they knew, if they had any idea what her life had looked like when she’d literally foraged for her meals while fighting a fucking war. He swallowed, throat tight in rising anger that had no real target.

He knew one thing with certainty: he’d just taken charge of the conversation. Hermione would need a minute.

“I see,” he said, offering a pulse of pressure to Hermione’s hand beneath the table. “I think I prefer those sorts of jokes over the threats to use your tools on me—those drills and such. I can never quite tell if you truly mean those in jest.”

Mr. Granger laughed a big laugh, a hearty laugh, the sort of laugh that caught the attention of strangers from its sudden volume. Mrs.

Granger made a meager attempt to rein him in.

“Don’t worry, son,” he said, spearing Draco with his own use of an endearment, one with implications that latched like vines onto Draco’s skin, then burrowed into his bones. “That’s the sort of thing we’d only ask of family.” Mr. Granger’s laughter had abated, replaced instead with a casual, but pointed lift of his brows, just enough to sway his statement towards a question if one chose to read it in that way.

Draco thought of the ring he’d once again pulled from his family vault. Of the portkey he’d had Theo create that would lead to a weekend in Italy to celebrate Hermione’s birthday. And then hopefully, to celebrate so much more.

Hermione’s hand had loosened enough that Draco could feel his fingertips again. She didn’t look at any of them though, suddenly quite interested in her drink.

“One day, then,” Draco said.

Mrs. Granger smiled, her husband said very little, and Hermione continued her fascination with her drink.

After they’d eaten, stumbling their way through adoration of the exhibits they’d seen and casual conversation about their respective plans for the evening, they said their goodbyes on the busy footpath outside the restaurant.

“You should consider getting a cell phone, dear. It would make coordination so much easier,” Mrs. Granger suggested on the tail end of a hug with Hermione.

Hermione’s face lit up, more excited than she’d looked for much of their meal.

“I should—yes. I could get one for Draco, too.”

He didn’t understand why he would need one, and he expressed as much, as they walked to their apparation point.

“Well, it would be nice not to have to send a Patronus if I need to contact you quickly.”

“But it’s a *thing*? That I’d have to carry with me?” His brows furrowed, trying to make sense of why on earth she would think carrying a little muggle technology box would achieve for him anything his wand

could not.

She smiled as he steered them into an alleyway and towards the apparation point. When they stopped, she lifted onto the tips of her toes and kissed his cheek.

“I’m probably going to get you one anyway.”

He resisted the urge to roll his eyes. She’d said it as if that settled that.

“I had a nice time today,” he said. “Did you enjoy your birthday afternoon with your parents?”

She bit her lip, but nodded. “It was nice, overall. Every day is a little better, you know? This whole afternoon seemed very normal.”

“And that part during lunch?” He twined his fingers with hers, a reminder of the attack she’d launched on his phalanges.

“They don’t know.”

“Will they ever?”

She shook her head.

He apparated for them. She managed so much, he could handle the magic.

—

The Malfoy eagle owl came in the middle of the night. It was the first official day of autumn, hours before Draco’s surprise Portkey to take Hermione to Italy activated. Draco had spent the evening before brewing several standard potions to build up a stock for the shop that he and Blaise may or may not end up leasing at the edge of Knockturn Alley. Draco had been almost certain he’d finally convinced Blaise that an owl-order business model could work, right up until Blaise walked into his office with a lease agreement and an unspoken reminder about who of them had the more successful business track record.

Hermione sat with him while he brewed, reading a herbology periodical that included work Longbottom had been doing with

dittany. She orated the more interesting passages and absently scratched behind Crookshanks's ears while Draco chopped, diced, crushed, and mixed his ingredients.

Later, with his potions under a stasis charm, he crowded her against one of the workbenches, bodies sealed together from head to toe. She pretended to be concerned about jostling his potions just like he'd pretended to care about the latest and greatest discoveries in plant grafting.

He fucked her on the tabletop, wooden edges biting into the back of her thighs that he healed with a salve he'd brewed mere hours before. She left scratches down the back of his neck, blunt nails digging into his nape; those, he didn't heal.

So, hours later, when the owl arrived long after he'd found peaceful sleep, Draco woke with his heart knocking behind his ribs, in rhythm with the tapping at his bedroom window. Confusion clouded his brain, a searing series of questions of *what* and *why* and *who* and *where* as his thoughts spun, pulled from unconsciousness too quickly.

Hermione's ice-cold toes, the only part of her that ran cold as she slept, dug into his lower back, pushing him towards the edge of the bed, forcing him up, awake, to address the rapping at their window. He might have laughed at how adorably sleep-addled she looked, shoving him out of the bed while mostly asleep herself, but his stomach dropped when the situation coalesced in his sleep-fogged brain.

A Malfoy eagle owl waited at their window, bringing with it an immediate sense of foreboding.

Draco jumped to his feet, sheets catching between his legs, causing him to stumble as he tried to throw them off. Hermione sat up, alertness finding her at his sudden movement. He opened the window, and goosebumps erupted across his bare chest from the slight autumnal chill in the air. He barely registered Hermione's arrival at his side, closing the window behind the owl that perched on one of their bed posts, clearly awaiting payment or a response.

"What is it?" Hermione asked, holding her wand over the parchment, offering him a *lumos*. He'd been so caught in the cold worry cascading down his spine that he'd intended to struggle against the darkness to read. She followed her *lumos* with a *tempus*, alerting him to the exact time he'd been sent whatever this letter was: half two in the morning.

Tiny, vicious spines prodded the underside of his skin, pricks of fear that registered as pain.

“My father,” Draco said. He forced a swallow through the rising lump in the back of his throat. He tried to elaborate, say more, but his throat closed, words wrung out, liquid and slipping to his stomach where they curdled.

Hermione took the letter from his hands, scanning it quickly. She released a heavy breath, sending a curl floating in between them for a moment. He watched as it rose, propelled by her breath and then fell again, across her face. He met her gaze.

“Let’s get dressed,” she said.

And they did.

Last month, he’d visited St. Mungo’s for a wonderful reason: a birth, life, genesis.

Now, he visited not knowing if his father had already met his end.

—

The lift to the spell damage ward nearly broke Draco of his barely cobbled composure. His nerves ratcheted higher and higher as the lift stopped at nearly every fucking floor on the way up.

“Why did mother wait so long to owl?” Draco asked to the brass grate drawn across the lift doors. “If it happened after dinner...” he trailed off, pulling out his pocket watch: nearly three in the morning now.

Hermione didn’t answer; she couldn’t. But her hand found the space between his shoulder blades, brushing slow, calming strokes up and down. He knew it should have relaxed him, provided comfort, but he only found himself growing irritated.

She must have felt the tension: on him, around him, become him.

“Maybe there was a lot going on—or they couldn’t reach you, or—”

“Stop,” he snapped. “If I’d been at the manor—”

“—that’s not productive thinking—”

“—what the fuck does productivity matter if it’s true?” He stepped closer to the lift grate, out of her touch.

“If it happened while they were out at dinner, you living at the manor wouldn’t have made a difference. I don’t know why that’s the first thing you’d think—”

“You’re not helping.”

He breathed in. He held his breath. He let it out.

He heard Hermione behind him. Her voice wavered, sounding confused. “I—I know.”

“I’m sorry.” He pinched the bridge of his nose.

“I know.”

The lift opened, released them.

Draco let Hermione speak to the nurse, asking after his father’s room. Guilt had taken his tongue hostage, battered his heart, become an inexplicable, unidentified intruder in his home. *Why* did he feel so guilty for a thing he’d had no part in? The fear, he understood. The concern, the worry, the chilly, prickling anticipation. But the guilt consumed all the rest, crowding out his ability to feel anything else.

They stopped in front of his father’s door. A new rush of tingling anxiety washed over his skin; Draco looked to Hermione.

She offered him a tight, weary smile.

“I’ll be out here.” She nodded towards a waiting area crammed with uncomfortable looking chairs with fraying, stained upholstery.

“I don’t know how long I’ll be—”

“I’ll be here as long as it takes.”

She’d been holding his hand. He hadn’t even realized. She squeezed once and turned to the waiting area.

Draco found his mother at his father’s side, perched unnaturally straight in a chair beside his bed, hand clasped in his. She had several wisps of hair breaking free of her bun, shadows just beginning to form

beneath her eyes, and a spot of something that looked an awful lot like dried blood just above her neckline, creeping up her neck.

The guilt inside Draco's chest doubled when she looked up, eyes widening, rushing him and offering the most open, genuine sort of hug they'd shared in years. He knew how to play this part though, he'd learned it so recently. Comforting his mother instead of being comforted.

Draco watched his father over the top of Narcissa's head. He slept, so pale his skin nearly matched his hair—Draco's hair—with a thin, scratchy looking blanket covering him to his chest.

"They're keeping him unconscious," his mother said against his torso before finally stepping away, returning to her vigil. Draco stood at the foot of the bed, feeling too out of place to find a seat.

"It was a nasty curse," she said, stroking a line down Lucius's wrist, the length of his thumb, before wrapping her hand in his. "Did terrible things to his"—she paused, stared at Lucius's torso, tried again—"to his insides. But he's mostly squared away now. Just resting, preventing complications."

Her thoughts disconnected at the end, fragments of meaning Draco assumed made sense in her head, but that were lost somewhere between creation and delivery.

Guilt reared its head again.

Lying there, Lucius looked so frustratingly human. Infallible persona nullified by a threadbare blanket.

Narcissa must have seen something in Draco's assessment.

"I've already tried to secure a room in a private ward—as if they've forgotten that we've made sizable donations to these facilities in the past—"

"Mother, it's—do you know *why* someone cursed him?"

She stopped listing the several specific donations the Malfoy estate had made to the hospital over what seemed like that last twenty years.

"We were at dinner. Walking to an apparation point, darling." A distant, dark look stole her prettiness, warping her features in the space of a blink. "I doubt there was any reason other than hatred for

us. The Aurors have opened an investigation. I suspect they'll put as much effort into this case as the Wizengamot did Lucius's appeals."

She kept her eyes trained on her husband, expression crossed between distress and adoration. Draco felt like an unfortunate voyeur.

And despite it all, despite the threats, the ultimatums, the general feelings of worthlessness, the truth remained. Draco's father was still his father: lying unconscious in a hospital bed, having narrowly escaped death.

This wasn't the first time Draco had worried he might lose his father. And it didn't feel any different than it had before.

Was there something so wrong with wanting Lucius to be healthy? Alive? Despite all the rest?

With a sigh settling like resignation, Draco sank into a chair in the corner of the room and waited.

Guilt burned him up, sweating him out. Desperate, Draco occluded. It had been a long time, over a year, at least, since he'd turned to this mental magic. It greeted him in coldness, but with the warmth of an old friend, a reliable way to cope.

What else could he do? Draco stared at his father, a huge part of this tiny family, as he lay in a hospital bed. He looked so breakable, so human. And Draco didn't know how to handle that. Not something that big, that small.

Perhaps that was where the guilt came from. After trying so hard to convince himself he didn't, Draco couldn't exactly deny that all he wanted—even as ice flooded his veins and he chipped it all away—was to love his father and be loved in return.

Lifelong dreams like that didn't die overnight. They died in pieces. In hospital rooms. At dining tables. Over marriage contracts. In war. And if they didn't die completely, even the tiniest shards left beneath the skin, they festered.

Draco hadn't planned on taking any more meals at Malfoy Manor for at least another week, but he couldn't stomach the idea of his mother sitting in that obscenely huge home, eating by herself. Hermione insisted he go. Always so gracious and kind, she insisted he needn't keep apologizing for having snapped at her when he was upset. Or for making her wait nearly three hours as he sat with his mother, wondering if he stayed just one more minute, perhaps Lucius might wake up and see him there, the devoted son he was always meant to be.

But Lucius didn't wake up, nor was he discharged the next day.

Slight complications with the Skele-gro on his ribs.

Nothing Draco should worry about, according to Narcissa. It just meant that they kept him unconscious longer than planned, in the hospital longer than expected. Narcissa only returned to the manor for a meal with Draco when the healers insisted that Lucius would not awake until the next morning, after a new round of Skele-gro, and that she should leave and take care of herself. Draco knew this because he'd been there, lingering in a hospital corridor instead of whisking Hermione away to Italy with intentions to propose.

While Lucius lay unconscious, Narcissa hovered at his side. Draco loitered, and Hermione waited nearby. It all had a strange backwardness to it that made him wonder how they'd all gotten there, game pieces in the wrong squares, not properly playing their parts.

Draco dined with his mother in the smaller dining room that evening, a table that only sat six, at maximum. The menu had been reduced to three courses, and only Tilly *cracked* in and out, delivering food and clearing it away. It was still a fine meal, limited though the service may have been. Draco's lingering guilt, and fear, and confusion, soured his taste buds, rendering what might have been an otherwise lovely autumn soup into something more closely resembling bile.

"I'm having Topsy clear out one of the spare rooms in our wing," Narcissa said, eyes on her wine glass. "It has better morning-facing sun—good for Lucius's convalescence."

Draco cleared his throat, swallowed his discomfort, pushed his soup bowl away.

"And how long do the healers think that will be?"

"Not long. But I'd like to make it as enjoyable as possible. Lucius does

prefer mornings, so a bit of morning light—I'm having the windows moved to ensure optimal sun."

"Moving the windows—of course."

Narcissa's hand, which had been resting flat against the tablecloth, slid off the edge, disappearing out of sight. Based on the way her arms and shoulders moved, Draco got the sense that his mother had closed her hands together in her lap: a careful, measured motion whenever she had something to say but didn't want to let too much out.

"I bring this up to tell you that I've found a few things I thought you might like to have"—a pause, a flicker from the sconces that shadowed nearly as much light as they produced—"now that you've decided to live on your own."

Draco genuinely could not tell if she meant her wording to intentionally exclude Hermione from his living situation, or simply to emphasize that he no longer lived with them at the manor. In light of Narcissa's recent stress, painted in blue-ish shadows beneath her eyes, Draco opted to give her the benefit of the doubt.

"What sorts of things?" he asked carefully, suspicion taking hold.

"Photos, mostly. Of your childhood."

"Oh—thank you. That would be nice to have."

Narcissa smiled, closed lips stretching her face, brows turned down as her expressions fought against each other. She hummed an acknowledgement and sipped her wine, pretty painted nails tapping on the crystal in an absent moment as she set her glass down. Her eyes darted to the sound as if only then realizing she'd done it.

Her hand retreated beneath the tabletop again.

"I'll have Topsy send them over?"

Draco shook his head, probably too quickly, to decline the offer. "I'll bring them with me, if you don't mind." He couldn't avoid the confused tilt to Narcissa's head. "I have new wards. They—aren't set up to allow for elves. We—well, we haven't been using Topsy the past few months."

He watched as Narcissa's confusion sank into a frown, disappointment.

“New wards?” she asked.

“Yes. Hermione set them up with Theo.”

In the quiet moment that followed, at a table meant for six, in a dim, rarely-used dining room, Draco wondered if that was the first time he'd directly mentioned Hermione by name. He genuinely couldn't recall. All the things he was meant to say about her, ask for her, tell them about her, had been muddled and jumbled in the graves of good intentions he kept digging with his bad decisions.

Narcissa didn't say anything about it. Her hand appeared again, reached for her wine, sipped, returned the glass to the table, and disappeared. Draco couldn't help but feel like she'd considered and dismissed several potential responses in the space of that single, smooth action.

“I went to Gringotts earlier this month,” she said, startling him with a conversation topic he hadn't expected in the slightest. “With our Hallowe'en gala approaching, I wanted to select from a few lesser-used jewels in the family collection.”

Draco found himself reaching for his own wine, delay and distraction all in one.

“The goblins mentioned that you've been to visit the heirloom vaults more than once this year.”

She didn't quite look at him, instead staring at his left ear, or just above his left shoulder. He watched as her jaw tensed, mouth sealed shut as she pulled a breath through her nose. He didn't know what to say.

“Did you?” she asked, and it could have meant several things. He took it to mean the smallest thing. Did he visit the vault?

“Yes, Mother. I did.”

Her eyes travelled the short distance from the space just next to his head to find his eyes. Light from the dining room fireplace reflected in hers, obscuring her blue with a watery orange. He wasn't sure what he would do if his mother started crying.

“Do you have”—her voice slipped, a crack in a facade for just a moment—“anything important you might want to share with me?”

Had he asked Hermione to marry him and not told her about it, she meant.

“Not yet, Mother.”

She almost looked relieved, and it was a most terrible conversation to be stuck inside of. He'd honestly thought it might be better, not having Lucius looming and silent at the end of the table. Draco had been weirdly, guiltily optimistic, that a meal shared with just his mother might yield something a little more relaxed, a little less fraught.

He almost didn't hear her when she asked her next question.

“Are you happy?”

Draco looked up from where he'd been seriously considering whether or not he could discern the tablecloth's thread count with the naked eye. It struck him that he couldn't reliably say if she'd ever directly asked him that question in his adult life.

If he really thought about it—she'd asked him in school, though not quite as directly. *Are you enjoying your classes? Are you making friends? Are you having fun with Quidditch?* All ways to ask after his happiness without ever actually doing so, he supposed. But this, it was direct. And it looked honest. Genuine.

So he answered as plainly as he'd been asked.

“More than I ever have been. I think one day you may need to decide how much that means to you.”

Chapter End Notes

so much love and appreciate to my darlings [icepower55](#), [Endless musings](#), and [persephone stone](#) for all their alpha/beta support! this chapter also marks the end of icepower55's involvement in a beta capacity, though her generous moral support and literary influence will no doubt remain! (and it's a good thing I finally figured out how to stop abusing prep phrases quite so badly, otherwise we'd be in trouble without her xD) I cannot thank her enough for all the time and energy she has put into discussing story with me, beta'ing, yelling at me about my long sentences, and being an all around outstanding friend!

and so many thanks, as always (are we tired of me gushing yet??)

to every single person who is reading this story. it truly blows me away to see the thoughtful commentary, the fun and interesting asks, and all the amazing enthusiasm for this monster of a story that is now rapidly approaching 200k. thank you so very much for reading! I'm so, so happy to know that folks are still enjoying it! see y'all on Monday!

Chapter 34: -.333, -.416, -.500

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

October

tick tock tick tock

Draco couldn't focus, couldn't think, what with all the screaming—wailing, if he wanted to be technical. His eardrums ached, sharp stabs piercing straight to his brain with every fresh shriek.

"I knew they could cry a lot, but Merlin; he's very loud." Draco tried to control his face, prevent the sneer and the derision and the disdain that crept closer to the surface each time James Potter opened his very small, very loud mouth.

Draco had been standing in Grimmauld Place with Hermione for all of five minutes and already he wondered if a *diffindo* to his skull might be preferable to a screaming baby.

The Weaslette looked at him, a blank, dead sort of stare in her eyes as she attempted to mollify the crying child in her arms.

"Yes," she said. "He's very loud. And you know what, Malfoy? I think it's your turn for him. You haven't held him yet, right? Here." Before Draco could even comprehend the absolutely unfathomable thing happening to him, she'd transferred the baby into his arms. "I'm getting a glass of wine."

Hermione, beautiful traitor that she was, laughed at him when he shot her what he could probably admit was an excessively panicked expression.

He shifted his weight, adjusted his grip on the very small and very fragile little human in his arms, and forced his body to relax. He loosened his limbs and rocked James in the same way he'd seen Hermione do at the hospital.

Blessedly, thankfully, miraculously, James quieted.

Draco continued rocking, a slight bounce in his torso. Hermione's giggles died with James's wails. The Weaslette rushed back into the room, wine glass in hand. As she skidded to a stop, some of her white sloshed, spilling out over the edge.

Draco arched a brow at her obvious alarm.

"Well, this isn't nearly as bad as you made it seem," he said.

"Why isn't he crying?" Ginny asked, stepping forward as she peered down at her child. Draco shrugged as much as he could with a baby in his arms; it mostly ended up as a continuation of his soft, pacifying movements.

"He seems to enjoy being rocked. Have you tried—"

"Malfoy, are you kidding me? If you finish that sentence I'll have Hermione liberate her godson from your arms so that I can hex your bloody bollocks off."

Draco engaged in another half-shrug, half-rock for James's benefit. "I don't know. He seems to be doing alright."

Draco caught himself smiling down at the little bundle in his arms far too late to school his features. The women in the room would have seen it, too.

This series of events was Potter's fault, obviously. It was Potter who owed Hermione about how he and Ginny had started going a little stir crazy, spending almost all of their time at home with their newborn, expressing a readiness to try and socialize more. And Potter was the one who made Hermione James's godmother, thus instilling in her an overwrought sense of responsibility that brought her—and a reluctant Draco—to Grimmauld Place to attempt having a full, adult dinner with them, evidently needing to figure out how that worked with a baby. Then Potter had the audacity to get stuck at work, something about a big case, life or death, and all that. Predictable.

Most things, if Draco thought hard enough about them, were Potter's fault.

He tried to find annoyance in that, tried to resist the strange, peaceful draw of the baby in his arms, but he found himself smiling, enjoying himself regardless of his own personal wishes to the contrary.

Perhaps babies practiced a subconscious form of siren-style magic. It

seemed reasonable, given the effects Draco personally experienced. He considered posing it as a question, but decided he didn't much fancy being laughed at.

"I suppose babies aren't so bad," he said instead. The Weaslette let out an unbecoming snort of laughter.

Draco tilted his head, looking down at the tiny bundle in his arms. "You kind of just want to squeeze them, don't you?"

"Alright, that's enough. I'm taking my child back." Ginny slid her arms beneath James, wine either finished or discarded. Draco hadn't been paying attention.

"I'm not saying I would. I have developed *some* impulse control over the years." He folded his arms across his chest when Ginny took James from him. "But they are sort of—squishable, wouldn't you say?"

He glanced at Hermione for confirmation, or agreement, or—something. But she only looked at him with the strangest sort of confusion crinkling between her brows, head tilted, lips parted as her mouth had slipped open.

He supposed, in hindsight, he'd just said a number of things that he would not have said otherwise—if not for the influence of whatever peculiar magic newborn babies possessed.

James started crying again and the Weaslette looked like she might do the same, shoulders sinking as she launched into a string of unintelligible shushing sounds. Hermione seemed mere seconds from stepping in, already pushing off the balls of her feet to save an obviously distressed ginger and her selectively cranky baby, when the Floo flared to life and Harry Potter made his majestic entrance.

The Weaslette advanced on him before he could kick the cinder from his boots.

"Your child needs a change. Your wife needs wine. I spilled it earlier when the Ferret mentioned wanting to squeeze my child."

"Thought he was *my* child when he cried like this?" Potter asked, accepting the baby being transferred into his arms.

"You're missing the point. He also stopped crying when Malfoy held him so—we're living a nightmare where Draco Malfoy is better at getting James to quiet than we are. So again, I'm getting wine."

And with that, Ginny whirled, exiting the room with a stomp and a huff and something wild crackling in the air.

Potter sighed, rocking James.

“Turns out being a parent is hard,” he said, spectacles trained on his child.

Awkwardness crept up Draco’s spine, an errant observer to this strange, highly strung situation in the Potter household that he really, truly wished to have no part in. Even Hermione seemed uncomfortable; she’d transitioned from staring at Draco with confusion to worrying her lip between her teeth as they all waited for—whatever was meant to come next. A meal? Drinks? An informative lecture on the trials of baby rearing?

Draco excused himself to the loo, a transparent excuse for a getaway, but successful nonetheless. It seemed to break the tension in the room as well, with Potter tending to his child and Hermione allowing the rock solid tension in her shoulders to loosen, dropping.

He took a moment to inspect his hair, check for creases in his shirt, search for other general signs that a baby might have disrupted his put-togetherness. When he opened the door, he found Hermione standing there, waiting.

She stepped forward. On instinct, he stepped back, finding himself pressed against the sink in Potter’s first floor toilet with a very serious Hermione looking up at him, eyes narrowed. She looked mere seconds from planting her hands on her hips and accusing him of something unsavory.

“You look good holding a baby.”

Not the accusation he expected.

Warmth dropped from his chest to his stomach, hot tendrils crawling outward. His eyes, which had been wide and questioning, narrowed, darkened as a sense of understanding settled in him.

“So do you,” he said, left hand already grazing her jaw, sliding past her ear, winding into the curls at the base of her neck.

She lifted her chin, angled closer, stepped closer, too, body flush with his.

“Why does that make me want to jump your bones?” she asked. Her eyes fluttered shut as he ran his fingers along her collarbone, a light touch over her thin blouse.

He dipped low and pushed forward, shifting their position such that he had her pressed against the wall opposite the sink, mouth hovering by her ear, thigh pressed between her legs. She let out a breath-tempered whimper as her back made contact with the wall.

“Because you love me,” he said, one hand still wound in the curls at the base of her neck, the other toying with peeks of bare skin between the hem of her blouse and her waistline. “And you can see it, can’t you?”

He slipped a finger just inside her waistband at the hip, sliding between the fabric and her skin as he travelled inward, stopping at the button closure in the center. He kissed beneath her ear.

“I can,” she said, hot breath coasting along the side of his neck. He thumbed the button on her trousers, popping them open. It was an easy thing to see, with her. He’d seen it at St. Mungo’s two months before when he should have been packing to go to The World Cup. Instead, he watched Hermione hold a child and alter his entire idea of what the future might look like while barely doing anything at all.

He dragged her zipper down, just enough to allow him the space to slip his hand inside her knickers. Her head thumped against the wall, dropping back as her mouth fell open, spilling a hushed, obscene sound into the tiny room with them.

He dipped his fingers, finding her warm and wet and already rocking against his hand and his leg. Her hands fell limp against the wall as she sucked in a stuttering breath, tiny gasps synchronized with his fingers: almost touches, barely touches, sliding in. She groaned, forehead falling to rest on his shoulder.

“Merlin—fuck, *seriously?*”

If Draco never heard Harry Potter’s voice again for so long as he lived it would be too soon. Hermione tensed at the sound of Potter’s shock; Draco stilled, knowing his body concealed their activities from view.

Draco turned his head and found Potter standing with his back turned to them, head shaking.

“You didn’t even close the door?” Potter asked, voice ascending in

something that sounded suspiciously like panic. The man had defeated dark wizards, this surely didn't even register on his panic scale. "In my house? In my loo? Really?" He let out a heavy breath. "Gin sent me to tell you she has wine ready. She's had her one glass and wants to live vicariously through you. I'm—going to try and forget I saw this."

Without turning back around, Potter left them there.

A hand closed around Draco's wrist. He turned back to Hermione as she tried to lift his hand from her knickers. He arched a brow at her, hand and fingers still firmly in place.

"He's gone." Draco smirked.

"They're waiting on us."

"I can get you off before they even start to wonder where we are again."

The pressure on his wrist loosened, less insistent. He watched her indecision fight the rising flush creeping up her neck.

She fisted his shirt fabric, pink blooming across her cheeks as she looked him in the eye with a most *Hermione* kind of determination.

"Five minutes and you have to close the door."

"Five minutes," he agreed. "And then you can tell Potter how he and Theo should start a support group."

Her embarrassed groan shifted into something sweeter. If he only had five minutes, he had to get to work.

—

"What is this?" Hermione asked from somewhere on the floor in their living room.

Draco looked up from his reading—another failed, valiant attempt at enjoying *The Count of Monte Cristo*—and spotted a few wild curls peeking over the top of a wall of books. When Hermione had told him she wanted to spend the weekend relaxing with their books, he'd naturally assumed she meant reading. Evidently, she'd meant

reorganizing.

After confirming that this bout of organization did not involve a crisis over her perceived contribution to their household, Draco excused himself from participation on the grounds that he had no interest in being hexed. She was much more patient with him working at the manor than she was with organization around the flat.

Thus, he'd adopted a strategy of avoidance, peppered with placation by reading her favorite book. He and Crookshanks toed a careful line on her nerves, sitting on the green sofa together, as Hermione warred with herself over whether or not she preferred organization by author or topic. Or how some gentleman named Dewy preferred to do it. Draco didn't bother offering his input.

She held a hand up over the tower of books that obscured her from view. In it, she gripped a large envelope he must have left on one of the tables she so often covered in new books as she purchased them.

He'd completely forgotten about it. His silence must have alarmed her because she lowered her arm, head appearing in its place as she lifted herself to her knees.

"Oh, that's—not much. I brought those home after I had dinner with my mother last month. They're photos she found at the manor."

"Photos?" Hermione shifted, standing. She eyed the barrier of books between them before opting to sit atop one of the stacks, rotate her legs over it, and then stand again on the other side. She planted herself between Draco and Crookshanks, looking far too pleased with her maneuvering.

"Of me," Draco said. "And my family, I presume. I completely forgot about them, to be honest." He closed *The Count of Monte Cristo* and arched a brow at her. "Must have gotten lost under your many and frequent biography acquisitions."

She rolled her eyes.

"I spoke to the shopkeeper the other day; he said he's running out of new ones to stock." She crossed her legs beneath her, turning to sit facing him. Her knees brushed his legs. "You need a new strategy for your grand plans to win that bet. Otherwise"—she patted the velvet cushion beneath her—"it's all mine."

"You think I don't have other plans?" he asked, reaching for the

envelope. He met resistance when he tried to pull it from her hands.

She lifted her brows, smirk growing. She tugged it back, out of his grip, and opened it.

With a small gasp, she pulled out a photo.

“Oh, Draco”—he snatched the photo from her hands—“weren’t you just the cutest?”

He looked at the photo, sighed.

“I know.”

She snorted an indelicate laugh and snatched the photograph back.

“Well don’t have too big a head about it. Is that Theo?” She flipped it around so he could see it again. In the frame, a young Draco and Theo threw pebbles into a pond in the Malfoy gardens, loop ending and restarting again just as Draco lobbed a pebble at Theo’s head.

“It is. We were maybe—eight? Nine? You see the peacock in the background?” She nodded, leaning to see around the edge of the photo still facing Draco. “It chased Theo all around the gardens maybe five minutes after that photo was taken.”

She flipped it around, watching the scene as a smile spread across her face. Slow at first, as if she might want to resist the amusement from such a thing, then suddenly, as she gave in.

“Why would it do that? Poor Theo.”

Draco smirked.

“I have absolutely no idea,” he said with a poorly concealed grin, having every idea and zero intention of voluntarily admitting his involvement in the aforementioned peacock chase.

Hermione shook her head, likely constructing the exact order of events in her mind without him having to provide a single detail. She knew the two of them well enough to guess.

She set the photo aside and pulled out another one. She blinked, amusement straining, as she took in the scene in her hands. Her brows drew together, but her smile persisted, less light slipping through.

She flipped it around so he could see.

“You’re so young here,” she said.

He stood in the gardens, in front of one of Narcissa’s prized rose bushes that bloomed a beautiful peach color. In the photograph, he fidgeted, young energy held at bay by his parents on either side of him. He could just see his father’s hand resting atop Draco’s left shoulder. All three of them smiled.

Draco could *feel* his features softening as he took in the scene.

“I was four or five I think—my birthday.”

“Your father looks—”

“—Happy? Young? Healthy?” He didn’t intend for his words to come out quite so sharp, especially not after the passing nostalgic ache that washed over him. He sighed. “I’m sorry, I—you didn’t see him at the hospital. He—couldn’t have looked more different from the man in that photo.”

It felt like a dramatic thing to say, an exaggeration. But perhaps the most difficult part was how close it came to the truth. The version of Lucius that Draco witnessed in a hospital bed had no hallmarks of the living. It made him wonder if, at some point in recent years—perhaps during his time in Azkaban, or under house arrest—Lucius had simply passed away and his corpse kept animating: a sneering puppet playacting at life.

The smile hit the hardest. How long had it been since Draco had seen it in person? Too long to remember an exact moment. But he remembered the feeling, remembered what it had felt like to earn his father’s laugh, to impress him with a witty retort or a clever parrot of his own words. Draco knew, now, with so much perspective, that he probably shouldn’t have ever had to *earn* that laugh in the first place. That little voice of perspective sounded suspiciously like Hermione in his head.

Nevertheless; the version of Lucius in the photograph looked proud, beaming at his son. Draco couldn’t help but miss that look, miss earning it. The draw towards that satisfaction pulled a line taught between reason and impulse.

When she finally spoke, Hermione’s words came out slow. “You all look very happy.”

“I think we were.”

“Do you—want to talk about them?”

Draco sighed. He didn’t want to be cruel, but no, he didn’t want to talk about them. He didn’t even want to *think* about them. If he could manage it, he preferred to avoid that particular mental confrontation for as long as possible.

“What is there to say, Hermione? That I suspect my own flesh and blood are a festering infection that can’t be cured? That in lacking a cure, my only option is amputation?”

He felt his chest clenching, words shifting from a normal cadence to tight, staccato-like bursts as he forced them out. He ground his teeth together.

“Why does that have to be your only option?” she asked.

“Because nothing else has worked—will work. You don’t understand what they’re like.”

“So tell me, let me help.”

“I don’t want to talk about this, Hermione.” He dropped his gaze to the photo that now rested atop her knee.

“I—I think we need to,” she said.

“Why would *we* need to? They’re *my* parents. They’re barely even a part of my life anymore.”

“But they are,” she said, insisting, pushing, forcing a conversation because she thought it needed to happen. Draco clenched his jaw even tighter, trying to remind himself that he loved her for her obscene Gryffindorishness, even when he really wished she would stop.

“They’re still a huge part of your life because they’re always *here*.”

She made a strange, vague gesture at him that felt like she meant to imply something profound about their place in his head or his heart. He might have rolled his eyes and shrugged it off if she hadn’t lifted herself to her knees and then crawled onto his lap, knees bracketing his hips.

“I love you, Draco. I want—I want to find a way to fix this—this relationship you have with them.”

He placed a hand on her waist, bringing the other to graze her

cheekbone, brushing a curl behind her ear. He didn't know how to be annoyed with her, inserting herself where she didn't belong. Not when she looked at him with such a raw earnestness, her wide, pleading eyes begging to be let into this very closed-off part of his life.

The sigh he released didn't feel annoyed, didn't sound frustrated; it only carried a sense of fatigue.

"This isn't your problem to fix," he told her. His voice came out flat as he watched her reaction, willing her to understand that it was his, and not worth her effort. It wasn't worth a single moment of conflict between them.

"Does that mean I can't try?"

"I don't think it means you should."

Their impasse stretched like a canyon, miles between them yet sitting face to face. He saw it, when it happened: the stubborn set of her jaw, the way her shoulders rolled back just enough, her spine straightening. She wouldn't give this up.

"Do you think they can be cured? Of their infection, as you said?"

His hand slipped from her neck, back down to her waist.

"I don't know. And you don't need to worry about it." She opened her mouth, rebuttal ready, always ready. She needed to be stopped before she pushed too far. "This is my problem," he said again. How many times now had he claimed this unfortunate thing as his own? "I'll fix it."

—

St. Mungo's discharged Lucius from their care at the end of September. It took Draco until the middle of October to muster the courage, resolve, and willpower required to join his mother and father for a dinner at the manor. He did not expect this fact to go unnoticed.

"So gracious of you to join us, son," was how Lucius greeted him upon his entry into the dining room. The sun had already set, darkening earlier and earlier each day that passed from the summer solstice. The

wall sconces, candles, lanterns, and fireplace all cast an orange and yellow light about the room that Draco once found comforting, warm and cozy. Now, it only looked like a veneer of color animating a corpse.

Narcissa interjected, a hostess's grace.

"We're glad to have you here, darling. We've seen so little of you in recent months."

Draco allowed Tilly to pull out a chair for him as he took his seat, realizing belatedly that he had not waited for his mother or father to sit first. Some habits, some parts of his upbringing couldn't be erased from the surface of his skin with even the strongest *evanescos*. Others, dining protocol among them, it would seem, only required a few months of burgeoning routines with Hermione to fall by the wayside, forgotten in a gutter and washed away with the tides of time.

"I've made a point to dine with you at least once a week," he said, even knowing his self-defense would solve nothing. "Normally, at least," he added at the end.

"Normally," Lucius repeated. "But not this month. Not when your father has so recently been *attacked*."

Draco sank deeper into his seat, heated-through with guilt. His father had a point, a valid one. Draco had been present at the hospital, concerned long enough to ensure Lucius would survive, and then made himself scarce again. Intentionally or not, he'd abandoned his role as a dutiful son.

"I—had several meetings early this month. Blaise and I—he's been helping me." Lucius valued business, valued success. Perhaps a venture like the one he'd been trying to get off the ground with Blaise could ease Draco's other shortcomings. "We've been considering an investment in real estate, for a potions business."

A muscle beneath Lucius's eye twitched, a forewarning to the sneer that formed a moment later. "A shop? How pedestrian, Draco. Why would you ever consider such a thing?"

Draco curled his fingers around the butter knife in his hand, blunt nails biting into his palms as his knuckles flushed white.

"I'm good at potions," he said, as calm and level as he could manage. "Blaise is good with finances. It could be—something for me."

Narcissa snapped at Topsy, who'd just appeared with a *crack*, ordering her to fill their wine glasses. His mother ran a hand along the tablecloth before speaking, smoothing the fabric as Draco assumed she wished to smooth the mood at the table.

"What your father means, darling—why would you want to work? You don't need the money—a shop is so—"

"It would be *mine*. The money would be mine, not like my trust."

Narcissa shifted in her seat, posture stiffening. "Your inheritance is yours, darling."

The peculiar thing about awful conversations was that sometimes the worst parts weren't even spoken. They were conveyed through body language and tone, a shift in mood so tangible, so *real* that even though Draco couldn't begin to quantify *how* he knew something in the room had changed, he knew it changed all the same.

The air perhaps: a shift.

Or the temperature: a drop.

Or maybe the sense of foreboding, fluttering in his chest: a freefall to his stomach.

His mother had spoken last, but he turned to Lucius.

Was his inheritance really his?

"It doesn't feel like it is."

Draco watched his father, who hadn't moved a single muscle, but met him grey gaze to grey gaze.

Narcissa spoke again. "That's ridiculous, Draco, why would you ever —"

"Because it has terms, does it not?" Distantly, Draco felt guilty for being so dismissive of his mother. But this conversation, he knew, and had known for a very long time, could only occur between him and Lucius. "You've said so. Perhaps not explicitly. But I'm not a fool."

Draco took a deep breath, letting the butter knife in his hand finally come to rest on the table. He forced his jaw open, coaxing out words that he preferred not to acknowledge, things he'd barely thought about himself, but that he knew held truth regardless.

“I’m a Slytherin. I’m hedging my bets and planning for all possible outcomes the way you would want me to.”

Lucius didn’t respond. He breathed through his nose, mouth sealed tight, brow lifted in a look that, years ago, might have forced Draco’s compliance. But Draco’s didn’t feel compelled towards cooperation, only guilt. He’d not seen his father since Lucius suffered a serious injury and now, Draco had instigated yet another disagreement.

The guilt burned in his stomach, bubbling like bile up his throat. He realized he breathed too heavy, chest expanding and contracting as he sat at his family dining table, waiting for his father to say something damning, half expecting to be disowned, right then and right there. Draco had already nearly dared him to do it.

He looked at the food on his plate: a butter basted white fish, haricot verts, roasted dutch potatoes. He hadn’t tried a bite of it and couldn’t bring himself to start now. His gaze caught on the fish fork beside his plate. A stupid, ridiculous utensil with a single use that, at its core, was barely any different from a traditional fork. If he never saw another fish fork again, Draco couldn’t imagine his quality of life would suffer.

Narcissa made a quiet throat-clearing sound. Draco tore his gaze from his uneaten meal. The room smelled rotten.

He met his mother’s eyes. Orange light flickered across her face and Draco lost himself for a moment in a memory of glowing orange runes. They cast a very similar light, a similar warning.

Draco reeled himself in; a fish on a hook just as doomed as the one on his plate. He needed to control the rapid decay in the room, in his orbit.

He looked back at his father. Forced effort, forced calm.

“How is your convalescence progressing?”

“Fully recovered.”

Lucius’s meal sat untouched as well. Narcissa’s silver *tinked* against her plate in Draco’s periphery, pulling Lucius’s focus; his nostrils flared.

“And how are you, Draco?” he asked: careful, unfeeling syllables.

"I'm—fine." He could think of no other response, shocked by the fact that Lucius had even asked, and knowing that had Narcissa not been present, the question would have never been posed.

"Do you have plans for Hallowe'en, dear? We were hoping you'd come to the gala, though we've yet to receive your response." Narcissa smiled at him, a kind, topic-changing smile.

Draco assumed she meant it as an offering, a safe change in conversation to pull them from the tension threatening to snap between father and son.

"I will not be attending," he said, heart thundering in his ears. She either did not know what she just asked, making her painfully oblivious in the most unflattering way, or she did and she chose to ask anyway, making her nearly as cruel as his father. Draco did not know which version of his own mother he preferred to have disappoint him.

Narcissa tilted her head, face pinching at his tone.

"And why not? You'll be missing several opportunities for social connections that would be valuable—"

"I noticed the invitation I received did not include a plus one."

Narcissa blinked, brows pulled together before she could stop them. When they softened, she released a small tittering laugh meant to reduce his words to absurdity: so ridiculous it was *laughable*.

When she finally responded, her words came out tight and thin as if being forced to speak them at wandpoint. "I suppose, if you had a friend you wanted to bring—"

"I don't have a friend I want to bring, Mother. I have a girlfriend. And as I know she would not be welcome, I have no plans to attend."

He did not eat his meal.

He did not apologize for the angry, quiet tear his mother shed, painted by orange light.

And he did not apologize for offending his father, in all the ways he had: Draco had lost count.

Chapter End Notes

many tremendous thanks to [Endless_musings](#), and [persephone_stone](#) for their alpha/beta support!

thank you everyone so much for reading and chatting with me and engaging in some of the most outstanding character analysis on the planet. why is everyone here so smart and thorough? I'm seriously blown away every single update. thank you so, SO very much!

and now feels like as good a time as any to update y'all on the posting schedule for this story since i recently had a tumblr as about it (don't panic! it's good news!) I will continue to update normally every Monday and Friday around 4PM EST through Friday Dec 18. Then, starting the week of Christmas (so Sunday, Dec 20th- Saturday Dec 26th) i will be posting a chapter a day (though, probably not all consistently around 4PM EST) until the story is complete! So this means that Dec 26th is the official end date for b&e! just over a month away! buckle up! and tell your friends who've been waiting to binge that now is the time, because things are going to start moving very, very quickly, very, very soon! xD

and thank you all again for reading! (just felt like I needed to sneak one last thank you! lol)

Chapter 35: -.250, -.333, -.416

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

November

tick tock tick tock

“So this is why they made you his godmother? Free childcare?”

Draco stood, limbs uneasy, caught between wanting to relax and feeling utterly disallowed to do such a thing. He didn't much care for inhabiting Potter's home without him present. Nor did he find that the addition of various baby accoutrements improved the already ghastly interior design choices that burdened Grimmauld Place.

“Harry and Ginny haven't had a night to themselves since August. I'm hardly put out.”

Hermione didn't look put out, true to her word. She looked comfortable, happy, bouncing a baby in her lap as she settled into a large, plush sofa.

Draco unlocked his joints, finally removing himself from the general vicinity of the Floo, where he'd stood since the Potters disappeared through it, just as Ginny dropped a parchment of emergency Floo addresses in his hand with a wink and a smirk.

His general distaste at being inside Harry Potter's home, trusted with his *child*, warred with an invasive warmth, shot straight through his veins, every time he looked at Hermione with her godchild. He wrangled his discomfort, forced it away, and joined her where she sat. As casually as he could manage, he let his arm rest along the back of the sofa, just above her shoulders. With the right sort of twist to his wrist, a careful brush of fingers, he could touch her upper arm. Lacking a reason to resist, he did just that, lightly dragging his knuckles against her skin.

Hermione smiled at the baby in her lap, releasing a contented sort of sigh.

“He’s hardly a handful, anyway,” she said, presumably in continuation of the conversation he’d already long forgotten, transfixed by the texture of her skin. “Especially if he keeps sleeping like this.” She glanced over at Draco, chin tucked behind her shoulder as she looked up through her lashes. “If he starts crying, I’ll just hand him off to you since you seem to have some kind of gift with babies.”

Draco fought the blanching sensation that overcame him, head tilted as he tried to discern her level of seriousness. His face twisted, he felt it, and it must have looked hilarious because Hermione had to cover her mouth, stifling laughter.

“It was a compliment, Draco.”

“Was it? It sounds like a conspiracy to rope me into babysitting. Or slander. I haven’t decided which.”

“You’re ridiculous.”

He smirked, dipping to drop a kiss to her cheekbone.

She sighed again: that same contented sound that he’d formerly believed she reserved exclusively for her most sated post-coital hazes.

“He’s beautiful,” she said, forefinger traveling the length of James’s tiny brow line.

Draco’s throat constricted, dried out, a drought where his capacity for speech ought to live. He swallowed; his fingers hovering at Hermione’s shoulder shifted, finding her neck. He dragged his thumb down one side of her spine, then the other, holding his agreement inside.

“Draco?”

He hummed, focus lost somewhere in an ether composed of indistinct futures.

“I think—we should genuinely try.”

“Try what?” His question came out automatically, seeking clarity, as her implications seized his lungs. *Try*? He’d only just come to the conclusion that he rather liked children. And while he liked them in theory, he didn’t know that they were quite *there*. She hadn’t even let him propose to her yet. Surely she didn’t mean children.

“To make amends with your parents. You haven’t eaten with them in nearly a month. Have you even owled? I don’t—I *can’t* destroy your family—” She broke off, eyes fixed on the baby in her lap.

“Hermione.”

He shifted, body tilted, an angle designed just for her: his entire world.

“You are my family, if you’ll recall.” A smile fluttered through her features as she rolled her eyes. “You are not at fault. And nothing is destroyed, it’s—just tense. At the moment.”

She tilted her head, a suspicious lift to her brow.

“You’re too optimistic,” he said, an attempt to duel at a different angle. “I know you want us to find some kind of—equilibrium, even if it isn’t one where we’re all unendingly fond of each other.” His fingers slipped from the back of her neck to the top of the sofa. “I don’t— *not* want that. But, I’m not overly hopeful.”

Hermione’s gaze shifted back to the dozing child in her lap. She frowned, delivering a very serious face to a baby.

“I almost lost my parents,” she said. Draco wondered if she meant to tell him or James. “It took work, but we’ve figured out how to—put the unforgivable things behind us and move forward. So that we can preserve a relationship with each other.”

Draco only realized he’d shifted slightly away from her after he’d done it, warmth absent from his chest, no longer pressed to her side.

“I haven’t lost my parents,” he said. He pressed his tongue against the inside of his teeth as he restrained himself. “We’re figuring out our new reality.”

“I know what it felt like to almost lose them,” she said as if he hadn’t spoken at all. “I don’t think I could bear being the cause of that for you.”

He leaned back in, desperate to erase that terribly sad look from her face.

“I could ask. If you *really* want to try.”

“We could have them over for Christmas dinner? We spent last

Christmas with my parents; it would be fair. A gesture.”

“I could ask,” he said again, confidence seeping from a leak he couldn’t identify. She just kept pouring her hope into him.

And fuck, if she’d didn’t look so deliriously hopeful, staring up at him with a baby in her arms, so startlingly warm and domestic. That feeling burrowed straight to the center of his chest. It didn’t feel new, or intrusive, or unfamiliar. Somehow, some way, it had become something closely tethered to his heart: a sensation that said all his futures involved Hermione, all his branching pathways narrowed down to the idea of her and a home and a family.

He could run a potions shop; he’d just signed a lease with Blaise. He could occupy his time brewing with a purpose again. He could look into what it would take to sell or share or lease or whatever the technical terminology would be for letting St. Mungo’s see his research for the dark magic removal potion he’d invented. These things were all within his reach, failsafe ventures he’d been either consciously or subconsciously planning for.

Sometimes guilt hurt, a physical tear at his ribs, a battering at his bones. His father had nearly *died* and Draco spent most of his time planning for a life that barely included his parents as footnotes. He breathed deeply, arm tightening around Hermione. He could do better. She was probably right; she usually was. He’d barely made any real effort to overcome the hurdles between them; he’d just expected his parents to accept Hermione how he wanted them to accept her. How very disturbingly Gryffindor of him.

“I might be pessimistic,” he said. “But I can be hopeful, too. I’ll stop by tomorrow—ask them in person. I promise.”

Not so long ago, Hermione would have had serious reason to doubt his ability to keep that promise. Now, she smiled at him, grateful, hopeful, and the face of everything he was willing to do this for.

—

“It’s not very big, is it?”

“Theo, I will hex you.”

“I’m just saying. I’ve seen bigger.”

“You’re being intentionally antagonistic and it’s not appreciated.”

Theo snorted, crossing his arms. He leaned against the wall opposite the front door, appraising the empty shop.

Draco’s shop, just barely in his possession as of that afternoon. He held the keys in his hands, freshly owled from Blaise. Draco, being the generous friend that he was, invited Theo to share in the excitement of visiting his new business venture for the first time.

“The rent is reasonable, especially with how close to Diagon Alley we are.”

Theo released a small huff Draco assumed he was meant to take as a laugh. “Barely in Knockturn, this.”

“You are such a shit. I won’t invite you next time.”

Theo lifted his hands in defense, palms out. “Sorry, sorry. Personality calibrations are still a touch off.”

“That’s not—how that works, Theo”—Theo rolled his eyes in response —“But Blaise said you’ve been—feeling better?”

“Gods, are you two talking about me? Strategizing my happiness?”

“In a sense.”

“Revolting,” he said, entirely without inflection. “A couple of Hufflepuffs, the two of you.”

“We’ve been worried.”

“My family vault was empty. It was my entire purpose for five years. I was allowed to be upset about it.”

Lacking any furniture in the shop, just open space waiting to be filled, Draco could practically hear the tension grinding in Theo’s jaw.

“I didn’t say you weren’t. I’m glad you’re—recalibrating.”

Theo rolled his shoulders, tilted his head, and a crack rattled through the small shop. He released a sharp breath through his nose and dragged a finger along the lip to the wainscoting lining the shop walls.

“Touch dusty, don’t you think?”

The whiplash grew less painful the more Draco experienced it. And in the last year, he’d toughened, a stiffened spine less susceptible to painful twists and turns.

“Blaise and I have a lot of work to do.”

Theo cracked a smile: sly, snakelike.

“So, he’s your boss now?”

“Absolutely not. He’s my investor.”

“With a majority investment. So he can order you around.”

“Fantasy of yours?”

Theo’s eyes narrowed. “I can’t decide if I deserved that.”

“Neither can I.”

“Do you parents know about this place?” Theo waved his wand, casting a *scourgify*.

“I told them it was likely happening.”

“And are they—pleased?”

“They did not seem overwhelmingly enthusiastic, no.”

Theo nodded absently, casting meager attempts at cleansing charms that Draco might have made fun of for their inefficiency if he had any room to joke. It wasn’t as if he had much experience with them, either. He’d gotten quite skilled in kitchen cleaning charms, as he’d discovered the easiest way to ease Hermione’s general tension was through a clean kitchen. But dust? Peeling paint? Creaky, uneven floorboards? Draco didn’t have the first clue.

Then there was the matter of stocking and organizing the space into something actually resembling a shop.

“You know who you need?”

Draco turned to find Theo perched on the counter at the back of the shop, far too comfortable for his own good.

“Who?”

“Pansy’s been brokering art and furniture and stuff lately; she could furnish the place.”

“She’d have to be willing to talk to me first.”

“I really don’t understand you two.”

Draco sighed, “I don’t, either. She needed space; I’m giving it to her.”

“Well, she moved to France. It’s been five years. And now she’s moved back to England, did you know? Seems like plenty of space to me. Time, too.”

Draco looked around his empty shop, a space now fully in his control, exposed bones over which he could layer flesh and create life. He could have something new, something his, something divorced of his very complicated past.

Pansy had been a part of that past, excised from his present, and Draco did not know if a reintroduction to his ecosystem would bring balance or a total collapse. He had so few pillars left, carefully arranged and painstakingly maintained. He knew enough about Pansy to know that she could topple them if she wanted to; he didn’t know enough about her anymore to know if she would.

“I might have mentioned over tea the other day that you’re with Granger now.”

That shouldn’t have made Draco nervous, shouldn’t have dropped a cold stone of unease in the pit of his stomach. But as he turned towards Theo in the back of the shop, he felt the first chilly tendrils of dread making their presence known.

“What did she say?”

“She was surprised. Bit nasty, you know Pans. Laughed when I told her we like Granger now—”

“Oh we do, do we?”

“—but you want to know what she asked me?”

“Honestly not sure that I do, but I’m certain you’ll tell me.”

“She wanted to know if you’re happy. And she was glad to hear that

you were.” Theo hopped off the counter and clapped his hands together. “So. I’ve done all the hard work for you, really. Just owl her.”

“I already told Hermione she could help me pick out the fixtures.”

Theo rolled his eyes at what Draco could freely admit had been a feeble excuse.

“Good thing you don’t *actually* need to pretend you want Pansy’s help to talk to her.”

“You’re a menace.”

“You wanted me to be happy—fixing this is going to make me happy.”

“You’re a manipulative menace,” Draco amended, already feeling as a seedling took root from the idea Theo had so forcibly planted inside his skull.

—

Draco arrived at the manor mid-dinner service for no other reason than because it felt like the right time to go. Meals with his parents had always been a sort of constant for him, a beginning and end to his day. He started his days with family, closed them as well. The breakdown of that routine over the last year, as he discovered something else to greet his mornings and nights, still couldn’t erase the lasting effect of feeling drawn to the manor at a certain hour, of rhythms in his body that reminded him of where he ought to be and what he ought to be doing at a specific time of morning or evening.

He didn’t owl ahead, didn’t ask for Topsy or Tilly or any of the other elves when he stepped through the Floo. He simply brushed the sparkling green cinders from his trousers and exited the parlor, headed to the dining room. He cast a *lumos*, letting the light from his wand illuminate the cavernous stone corridors that his parents evidently did not feel bothered to keep lit. They weren’t expecting company, after all.

He paused at the door to the dining room, flattening a line from shoulder to shoulder, resisting the urge towards a rounded posture,

caving in on himself.

He did not knock; he simply entered.

The heavy oak door swung open to reveal a dark, empty dining room. His brows dropped, lids narrowing as he dragged his gaze about the room. Confusion convinced him that perhaps he'd arrived at the wrong time. He pulled his pocketwatch from his trousers.

The watch told him what he already knew; it was dinnertime at Malfoy manor, and yet, the esteemed inhabitants were nowhere to be found.

Draco sighed and called for Topsy. When she arrived with a *crack*, she spun, ears flopping, giant eyes squinting at the concentrated light from his *lumos*.

"Hello Topsy," he said, crouching as he held his wand to the side, allowing the light to better diffuse around them. "I've come to speak with my parents. Are they out for the evening?"

"No, no," Topsy squeaked, hands holding onto the tips of her ears. "They is having their dinner."

Crouched at eye level with the elf, Draco tilted his head, a brow lifting. He looked pointedly at the vacant, dark dining table beside them.

"Not here," Topsy said. "The small dining room."

And before Draco could marvel, or ask a clarifying question, or do anything else in response to Topsy's words, she reached out with her little hands and whisked them away in a *crack* of elf magic.

A moment later, they landed in the small dining room with its table for six, seating two. Lucius and Narcissa sat together at one end, staring at him with identical expressions of surprise. Then it shifted. On Narcissa, surprise became a smile as she rose, already approaching with a greeting. On Lucius, surprise became suspicion, making no move to acknowledge Draco's sudden arrival.

"What are you doing here, darling? We would have prepared a full service had we known you planned to join us." She wrapped her hands around his forearms, as if to determine his solidity. Then, with confirmation of his physical form, she pulled him into a hug. A light jasmine scent followed her movements, lingering in his space even as

she pulled away. She turned to Lucius, hands back on Draco's forearms. This time it felt like she meant to keep him in place, unwilling to let him go. "Did we receive an owl?"

"I would have told you if we did. Unfortunately, I believe we had no advance notice of this intrusion."

Narcissa ushered Draco towards the table, pressure from her fingertips insisting that he follow. "Don't listen to your father, darling. It's no intrusion at all."

"I didn't come to dine with you," he said. It was a weak protest, punctuated with defeat as he took a seat, regardless.

Lucius lifted a brow. At a much smaller table, the action felt more personal, so close. "You know what time we dine."

"I—" he faltered. His logic, his reasoning, it felt so sound not so long ago. Narcissa reclaimed her seat across from him.

"Yes?" she asked, resuming her meal as if his appearance hadn't been entirely out of nowhere.

"Why are you eating in here?"

Of all the things he might have asked: that was what he went with, still a bit *stupefied* from disorientation.

"We—hardly need a full service for the two of us," Narcissa said.

"But you always eat in the dining room."

Draco looked at the table between them: a tray of chicken, a bowl of greens, roasted vegetables, a bottle of wine. To the side, two crème brûlée under a stasis charm. Their full meal, every course, already on the table with them.

"As you have made abundantly clear, Draco. Things can change." And yet, Lucius's words still cut with the same precision, the same devastating accuracy as they always had.

Draco had no response, so he said nothing. Instead, he watched as Topsy set a plate in front of him, delivered silver, a wine glass that she filled from the decanter on the table. Draco thanked her, and then flinched as she disappeared in a *crack*.

He had waited so long. He'd searched for the right openings, the right

opportunities to avoid rankling an already rankled situation. But to no avail. He ignored the place setting in front of him and did the thing Hermione had been asking of him all along; he decided to be bold.

“I want to spend Christmas with you. With Hermione.” He inhaled, too heavy a breath. “I want for us, all of us, to have dinner together. On Christmas.”

He certainly could have said it more eloquently, but he relished that he’d said it at all.

Draco never knew silence to taste so sour, so sickening, so completely wrought with clashing expectations and realities.

“You want me to dine with the Ministry Representative gutting my ancestral home?”

Draco forced himself to meet Lucius’s eyes. To speak with a level tone. To ask for understanding, not damn the lack of it.

“I want you to dine with the woman I have been in a relationship with for nearly two years, who has yet to formally meet my parents as my girlfriend.” He shifted his gaze to his mother, more pleading. “She is willing, and gods know she shouldn’t be considering the lack of effort made to welcome her here. But she is willing, and she is wanting. She is willing to do this for me, and for you.”

His mother’s face bore a look of shock, of unease, of tension drawing the muscles in her jaw tight, lips thinning. Lucius did not speak.

“Please. Mother, Father.” He turned again to Lucius. “If what happened to you earlier this year has taught me anything, it’s that I don’t *want* to lose you. Did you know she waited at the hospital for hours? The whole time I visited you, she visited, too. But she stayed in the corridor. She respected that you would not care to see her—even though you weren’t even conscious—but she stayed. We’re balancing so much. I think we could all enjoy so much more of our lives, of each other, if we tried to be amicable.”

Draco expended all his words, a well running dry, as much as he could think to say to convince them. His heart thudded high in this throat, each thump threatening to cut off his airway. He forced a calming breath through his nose, refusing to let his parents see the nerves that set his skin on fire right there at the dinner table.

“Christmas dinner,” his mother said carefully, cautiously.

“Christmas dinner,” Draco confirmed.

Narcissa watched him, very still. Her eyes volleyed from one side of his face to the other, from his hair to his robes and back to his face, as if memorizing him, cataloguing a sight she couldn’t guarantee seeing again.

Then, slowly, her gaze shifted to Lucius, meeting his eyes, a silent conversation Draco couldn’t hope to understand, a language he did not know, could not learn: party of two. At best, Draco could imagine a cord drawn between them, vibrating with the tension he could practically feel lashing the table, his nerves. He watched as concession met resistance, a battle balanced on the tight line.

Slowly, concession pushed further, past the middling point between them, encroaching on Lucius’s seat at the table. He swallowed it with dignity.

Finally, Narcissa spoke, voice surprisingly soft. “We can—manage that.”

With a tense nod, Lucius allowed an unwilling sort of assent. “At the manor, of course.” He sounded as if he wanted nothing less.

Draco could make that work. He’d accept whatever agreement they were willing to offer. His diaphragm eased, releasing a pressure in his lungs he hadn’t even noticed. It unfurled, unclenched, relief unwinding in a whole series of softening muscles: of tendons and ligaments and fascia all loosening with a single, disbelieving exhale.

“Thank you,” he said, meaning it. He wondered when had been the last time he genuinely meant to give his parents thanks for something. “Thank you,” he said again, still questioning his grasp on reality.

He hadn’t realized how tightly he’d wound his fear of them denying this inside his chest. Having it unwind, he finally felt like there existed a future, somewhere out there, where Draco could have both. It filled him with a flammable hope; he could have both the woman he loved and the parents he missed.

He allowed himself to forget, in a moment of elation, how much tinder hid in his family home.

Chapter End Notes

y’all know the drill: [Endless_musings](#), and [persephone_stone](#) are

outstanding support, and i owe them so much for their alpha/beta services in this chapter!

i am so excited that y'all are excited about our week of finale posting extravaganza! i CANNOT believe we are just one chapter away from being finished with yet another year. they are going by too fast. it's madness. and thank you so many times over, as always, to all of you lovely people reading and commenting and chatting with me about this story! I've had a tough writing month, and every drop of motivation i get from knowing someone enjoys something I've written is a huge, huge help. so thank you my friends! i owe you such a tremendous debt!

Chapter 36: -.166, -.250, -.333

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

December

tick tock tick tock

Draco orbited, lost in Hermione's gravitational pull all evening. He enjoyed the party, enjoyed celebrating his accomplishment, enjoyed having a business that belonged to him. But whenever he looked up, his eyes cut through the crowd of his distinguished guests, finding her in a matter of seconds. His grand opening soirée had been a glittering success, even by Blaise's impossibly high standards—if the clap on Draco's shoulder and the slightly intoxicated, "Great work," were any indication.

The crowd thinned and Draco's skin buzzed pleasantly with champagne and success. It felt good. *He* felt good, like he'd achieved, accomplished, proven himself, even if it was only a silly little potions shop at the edge of Knockturn Alley. If the elegant cocktail tables, floating champagne service, sparkling artificial snow, and din of laughter, conversation, and congratulations counted for anything, this could be enough. The party had been magical, and he could feel that magic swimming in his veins as the guests began to disperse, conversation waning.

His eyes found Hermione again, standing at a cocktail table, fingers wrapped around the stem of a champagne flute as she smiled—tight and disingenuously—at the person across from her. Draco tilted his head and stepped around an ice sculpture, curious to know who dared bore Hermione Granger. Draco didn't recognize the witch, but he did recognize the tension crinkling at the corners of Hermione's eyes, tightness she could never quite relax when impatience crept its way up her spine.

Her eyes flickered to him, catching him watching. Her companion gestured; Hermione nodded, then looked at Draco again. He watched as a brightness sparked to life in her eyes as she lifted her champagne glass barely an inch off the table and brought it back down: did it

again, and once more. Three taps. A signal.

A smirk pulled at his lips, entirely independent of conscious effort. He wasted no time, navigating through the lingering crowd and finding himself at her side, making excuses for them, and bidding farewell to the last of their guests.

“Did I see Pansy Parkinson here earlier?” Hermione asked as Draco cast a locking charm on the door once the shop had finally emptied of friends and future patrons. The hour had long past the time when clocks ticked over to begin counting a new day.

Draco’s grip on his wand tightened as he lowered it. “I don’t know. I didn’t see her. I—haven’t talked to Pansy in years.”

“I thought I saw her pop in and talk to Theo for a minute. But it could have been someone else.” Hermione shrugged it off, spelling the various empty champagne flutes and hors d’oeuvres plates to begin collecting themselves.

“If she was here, she didn’t say anything to me.”

Hermione stole a maraschino cherry from a large crystal bowl. “You know, I don’t think Pansy Parkinson has ever said a single thing to me that wasn’t outright nasty.”

Draco sighed. “To be fair, until not so long ago the same could probably have been said for me.” He cast a spell, magic swelling with a gust, pulling tablecloths from the tables and folding them. “Theo wanted her to furnish this place, tried to convince me to hire her.”

“Pansy?”

He nodded. He could feel the tension around his eyes, noticed the way his lips sealed shut as his mouth pulled into a forced smile.

Hermione brought her hand to his wrist, lowering his wand, halting his spells.

“We’ll worry about cleaning up tomorrow. You—seem like you might have more to say about that?” Her voice lifted at the end of her sentence, matching her brows as she looked up at him.

“She was—a big part of my life for a long time.” His jaw tightened, trying to hold back a verbal rockslide. He could say so much about his long, complicated history with Pansy Parkinson. In holding it all in,

what eventually slipped out sounded bitter. “She fucked off to France with Daphne Greengrass after the war. Something about cutting out bad influences.”

“That’s not fair to you.”

Of all the things she could have said, Hermione picked the thing that bore straight through the emotional debris trying to make a mess of his new shop. She watched him as he swallowed, then spoke before he could gather his thoughts.

“You did an excellent job furnishing this place without her,” she said, smiling, sliding her arms around his waist. “It’s very orderly. Very *you*. And once you finish filling it with stock, hire a clerk, perhaps, it’ll be a real shop.”

It sounded remarkably simple coming from her lips like that.

“It will be. And it’s mine.”

“I’m proud of you.”

Pride. A slippery, finicky thing. A question skittered through his thoughts, chasing the rush of contentment. What mattered more: the pride or the person he’d earned it from? He’d once contorted himself to earn his father’s pride, only his father’s. Later, he would have been grateful to earn it from anyone, validation for work he’d done to better himself, behave differently. But now, he couldn’t imagine wanting to earn anyone’s pride more than he wanted Hermione’s. He couldn’t decide if that was a dangerous thing or not.

He didn’t mind a little danger. He’d lived with—survived—much worse. This danger felt like excitement, like a thrill that reminded him of his own mortality. *Gods*, he loved her.

He needed to make another trip to the Malfoy vaults. Perhaps trying to wait for Italy or the perfect moment was a fantasy. Maybe he’d been waiting for the right moment to propose in the same way he’d been waiting for the right moment with his parents. He could make his own moments, engineer their rightness for himself.

He disentangled her arms from his waist, pulling her towards the shop’s back room.

“What will you keep back here?” Hermione asked as she let her fingers trail down his arm, stepping away, examining the space.

“I’ll put up some shelves. I’ll keep books, periodicals, ingredients. Cover the walls.” He turned on his heel, finding her watching as he appraised the room. “I won’t have to turn our spare room into a brewer’s dungeon any longer.”

Hermione made a show of examining the bare walls, taking several careful steps in an arc, orbiting him this time. She pivoted, slow.

“But I like watching you brew.”

“Do you?”

Hermione pursed her lips before a light laugh escaped, the first indication that she’d had a couple of drinks throughout the evening. He’d had some, too. The room felt warm, full despite its complete barrenness. His love, her pride, his heart, her head; they ate up all the free space.

She didn’t answer immediately. She continued her arc: careful steps, slowly moving closer. A spiral, a degrading orbit, a destination.

“Why do you like watching me brew, love?” He had to ask, he couldn’t stop himself.

“You’re so focused.” Another step closer, spiraling. “When you brew, it’s your whole world. And you pour everything you have into it.” She stepped again, glancing him, a sideswipe. “All your brain power, your dexterity, your creativity, your time.” Another step, a turn, objects colliding.

“That doesn’t sound all *that* compelling,” he teased, hands skating up her sides as she came to a halt, chest to chest with him.

“Sometimes you look at *me* like that, too.”

“I’d wager more than sometimes.” He fisted her curls, hand disappearing in the softest bramble imaginable. A noise spilled from her throat, high pitched, almost whimpered. She dragged her fingertips up his left thigh, over his hip, coming to rest on his belt.

“How am I looking at you right now, Hermione?”

Draco tried not to fidget as he watched Hermione decide between dresses in fuschia and ivory. She adamantly refused to consider any fabrics even remotely resembling Hogwarts house colors, determined to present herself as neutral as possible.

This was Draco's third Christmas with her—if he counted the one in 2002 when they didn't technically spend Christmas together but so much had happened that it felt worth counting. He tried to hold onto that thought, the pleasantness of another holiday with her. He armed himself with it, battling his nerves.

Draco, nervous in a bad, unproductive way.

Hermione, nervous in a buzzing, frantic way.

Neither fully prepared for a meal with his parents, if Draco had to guess.

He swallowed, watching her debate her options as she stood casually, debilitatingly beautiful, in her bra and knickers.

On any other day it would have been a criminally distracting offense, but Draco forced himself to focus.

This dinner with his parents was his chance, and he would only have one opportunity to get it right. He'd already come too close to losing them, constantly teetering on the edge. His father had nearly *died*.

The relief Draco felt when they'd agreed to dine with him and Hermione had settled his resolve. Resolve wrapped in nervousness, in trepidation, but in determination, too.

He would do anything to make this work. He'd already failed his father once, a family account he'd let flounder and fail and then had ripped from him when he'd said too much, at the wrong time, offending. Enough time had passed—a year, in fact—for Draco to show his parents that he could still be a proper, if modern, heir to the Malfoy Estate.

Draco stood as Hermione slipped the fuschia dress over her head. He began buttoning his shirt, pleased he'd opted for charcoal trousers and that her final choice didn't necessitate he change. He stepped up behind her, fastening his cufflinks as she examined herself in the dresser mirror.

With tremendous effort, he did not look at the valet box resting atop

the dresser. He'd intentionally pulled his cufflinks from it while Hermione had been in the closet selecting dresses. If he looked, she would look. And if she looked, she'd find the ring he pulled from his family vault—again. And hopefully, for the last time.

Keeping it in the flat already posed a risk, what with how nosy and prone to reorganization Hermione could be. A part of him wanted to reach for it, right there. It was Christmas day, after all. It could be her gift. Maybe this could be his moment in the making.

She turned before he did something impulsive, her back to the dresser, her chest to his. She placed a hand on his, stopping his action as he pushed metal through cotton.

“You don’t have to.”

She looked down at his cuffs, brows drawn together. When she finally looked back up at him, she wore a face of concern, but determination. She'd spent the whole day in a sort of nervous flutter; seeing this level of resolve felt important, monumental, in a way.

“Wear cufflinks?”

If he'd know what she intended, he might have stopped her. But she caught him off guard, nimble fingers rolling his sleeve, dropping his cufflink on the dresser. Before he had the wherewithal to react, she'd exposed his left forearm, a dark shadow staring at them from beneath his concealment charms.

He stared at her, staring at *it*. Even obscured and nothing but a shadow, knowing it was there was the worst part. It took him one slow blink to come to his senses. He tried to pull away.

“You don’t have to hide it. I know it’s there.”

Against his better judgment, his arm went limp in her hands. Perhaps this was a fight he'd been waiting to lose.

“You could remove it, too, if you don’t like looking at it. Instead of just glamouring it everyday.”

Tendons flexed in his arm but he did not pull back. “You know I can’t.”

Hermione sighed. She lifted her hand. Carefully, as if approaching a wounded animal, she pressed two fingers to the inside of his elbow, a

light touch with her fingertips. Lighter still, slowly, she let her fingers trail down his arm, over the glamour and the brand beneath it, to his wrist, and back to his hand, where she anchored him in place.

“You punish yourself over it every day.” She sounded so sad.

“I do not.”

“Then remove it. Your potion could do it.” Hermione didn’t often raise her voice, didn’t often snap. But her tone sharpened, cut with precision. “Either remove it or wear it like it doesn’t own you. But this? Long sleeves, a blurred brand? I’m not—ashamed of you. You know that right?”

He couldn’t place why he made the connection, couldn’t quite rationalize why, of all the things that could come to mind standing there with her, a memory of Azkaban swallowed him up. No longer standing with her in their bedroom, but sitting in a cell: one hundred and five days in isolation. He shivered, damp stone walls and stinging salt air clinging to him, even now, years later.

“I know you’re not ashamed of me,” he said, seeking his anchor in her hand. “Are you going to Gryffindor me right now?” He tried to smile, or smirk, or otherwise twist his lips to form a shape that wasn’t a frown or a grimace or the echo of a scream.

The smile she returned barely qualified as such, an equally failed attempt at avoiding frowns.

“I think so,” she said, lifting her wand. “May I?”

He inhaled, determined not to feel the sting of salt. He had no choice, not really. He’d never been capable of denying her. Never wanted to. He dipped his chin, a verisimilitude of a nod.

Before he could blink, she’d cast a *finite incantatem* on his concealment charms. Barely pausing, she shifted to his other arm, unhooking the cufflink, depositing it on the dresser, and rolling his sleeve to the elbow. She stepped back in the scant space between her back and the dresser, pressing against it, examining her work.

His forearms felt foreign, exposed, a part of him he’d hidden away for years. She placed a palm flat against his chest, drawing his attention away from the prickling unease of exposure.

“I’m optimistic,” she said. “I am. I think this dinner has the potential

to be really, really good for us. But as much as I believe this dinner can go well”—she looked down at his Dark Mark and his eyes followed hers, really looking at it for the first time in a very long time —“I also think they should have to face the consequences of their actions. You don’t have to make the terrible thing they put you through easy on them.”

He opened his mouth.

“And I swear to Merlin, Draco Malfoy, if you try and tell me one more time how you *wanted* to be branded I will hex you, dinner be damned.”

He closed his mouth.

Then opened it again. “Are—are you weaponizing me?”

She clearly hadn’t expected that, breath whooshing out of her.

“Maybe. Or perhaps I’m liberating you.” She cast a glance around the room, focus catching in several places before she finally found his face again, contrition seeping in, overtaking that confident determination she’d worn mere moments before. “Your relationship with your parents and with your past and—all that. It’s complicated, I know. And I’ve realized that I pushed, probably more than I should have. It feels so much like an impossible situation. I’m just—I’m trying to figure out what’s possible. I want to help and I don’t think I know how.”

What could he say to that? Her effort might be misplaced, but then again, it might not. How could either of them know, really?

She cracked a tiny smile that shined light through the shadows cast between them.

“Besides—you look quite attractive like that.” Her smile cooled, twisting to a smirk, something sly. “I like your arms.”

That, of all things, such a light and ridiculous thing to say on the heels of what they’d just been wading through together, snapped him out of the weighted melancholy trying to smother him. He lifted his arms, braced them on the dresser, on either side of her frame. He leaned closer.

“Is that so?”

She tried to laugh, but it caught in her throat. “Don’t look so smug. You know you’re distractingly attractive. This isn’t news. Especially not after two years.”

He failed. His eyes flicked towards the valet box. The ring was *right there* and Hermione was *right here*.

“Two years is a long time,” he said, voice low, almost croaking.

Urgency seized him. They were about to throw themselves off a cliff, descend into a valley and prostrate themselves at his parents’ feet. It could go terribly. Monumentally terribly. He could make this moment before all that *theirs*. In their bedroom, living their lives, overcoming the little things that took up so much space.

Hermione swallowed. “It is a long time.”

“Twice what I had with Astoria.”

“One less than what I had with Ron.”

“Hermione—”

“I found it earlier.” Her eyes darted to the left and it was an unmistakable motion, even though the valet box sat out of her line of sight. “I didn’t open—I didn’t look—but I saw—”

“*Hermione*—”

“Ask me after.”

Draco blinked.

“After?”

“After we’ve done this. After we’ve had a civil meal with your parents.” Her chest expanded, a resolved breath. “Ask me after.”

—

Topsy greeted them at the Floo when they arrived at Malfoy Manor, a friendly welcome. Hermione seemed unfazed, or perhaps unaware.

“You seem tense—well, more tense,” she said as they followed Topsy to the dining room.

“We weren’t greeted by the master of the estate. We’re being escorted by an *elf*—”

“Don’t demean Topsy—”

“—That’s not what I mean, Hermione. It’s a social custom. He’s—they’re—flouting it.”

Hermione frowned, pace faltering for a half step.

“That doesn’t necessarily mean anything,” she said, optimism soaking every word. He would call her naive if he didn’t know her so well. He knew when she forced something, when she intended to manifest it into existence by her sheer, outstanding willpower.

He reached for her hand, cooling the heat in his chest with a fresh gulp of air.

“You know what’s strange?” he asked. “You spend more time here than I do, these days.”

Her hand pulsed in his: a silent acknowledgement.

There was no ceremony when they reached the dining room doors. Topsy simply cracked them open with her elf magic and led them inside. Draco might have preferred another moment to collect himself, to prepare himself to cross the boundary between *before* this meal and *during* it, leading soon to *after*. He clung to the idea of after.

Lucius and Narcissa sat at the formal dining table, sipping wine from crystal goblets. Draco’s gaze caught on the hors d’oeuvres service already presented on the table.

The dining room itself looked lovely; a fifteen foot fir sat where the buffet table normally lived. Garland stretched between archways. Charmed snow floated and swirled at the ceiling. Candles flickered everywhere, on every possible surface. The fireplace roared with a warm, orange glow. The whole scene felt bright, warm and sparkling. It was quite ruined by the dread that trickled down Draco’s back.

Narcissa stood, smiling her perfect society smile in greeting.

Draco saw the exact moment her gaze landed on his attire, on his

rolled sleeves: first his right, then an immediate switch to his left. He couldn't recall a time when he'd ever let his mother see his mark, not since the war. He tried not to flinch, not to squirm, not to reach over and shove his sleeve down.

She blinked away the tension that formed between her brows, one hand resting carefully on the back of her chair. He watched her grip loosen, a conscious uncoiling of whatever emotion had just seized her.

Lucius remained seated, but his eyes tracked from Draco, to Hermione, and back again. Slowly, and with a stiff sort of motion, he nodded a greeting.

"Son," he said, jaw barely moving. "Ministry Representative Granger."

Hermione's hand clenched in his before it dropped as she inhaled.

"Hello," she said, only the tiniest waver poking through her armor. "You may call me Hermione. The formality is hardly necessary." She pivoted her gaze from Lucius to Narcissa. "Your dining room looks lovely."

Narcissa's smile shifted, closer to genuine than forced. "Thank you. Please, sit."

Draco pulled a seat out for Hermione across from his mother, where he usually sat. He then took his place at the head of the table, opposite Lucius at the other end. He resisted the temptation to comment on the fact that his parents had not waited for their arrival to take their own seats. That could be a slight Hermione need not know about if she didn't recognize it.

Hermione said something about decorative charms. Narcissa responded in kind. Their voices seemed to roll around the hollow spaces between crystal and china. The distance between Draco's seat at one end of the table and Lucius's seat at the other felt comically large, divided by an obstacle course composed of serving platters and silver.

Outside of his unintended half-meal spent with them in November when he asked for this dinner, it occurred to Draco that he had not dined with his parents for nearly two months.

Tilly *cracked* into the room beside him, delivering his soup service.

"Thank you, Tilly," he said. "Milly sends her wishes for the holiday

season.”

Draco ignored the scrape of a fork against a salad plate, looking instead at Hermione, who offered him a small, warm smile. He watched as her forefinger bobbed up and down, not quite tapping the table, but a close, considering thing. Then she spoke.

“Is there anything we can convey to Milly for you the next time we’re at the Nott Estate?” Hermione asked.

Draco’s chest flooded with pride. Even in a pit of snakes, she refused to be anyone but herself. Gods, did he love her for it. He used that sensation, swirling in his chest, to buoy him through several uninspired courses.

His parents served them a fine meal, lovely on a normal day, but hardly something he would have expected for a special occasion. Particularly not after having been subjected to so many extravagant meals with them in the last year—blatant attempts to curry his favor. He’d not warned Hermione to expect opulence, uncertain how the evening would fare, and he felt grateful for that decision.

He hoped above all else that she did not know or notice the unspoken insult presented with Cornish Hen and haricot verts. His bloom of pride settled as attempts at broken conversation stalled. He felt the shift in Hermione’s tone as her irritation grew.

It was a subtle thing; she kept it well hidden. If his parents could see past their dislike of her they would see nothing but a gracious, grateful, smiling guest at their table, trying so very hard to impress, to carry on a conversation longer than the series of syllables required to dismiss her attempts. But Draco saw her cracks, her frustration, her desperate need to succeed.

“Do you and Mr. Malfoy have any plans for the New Year, Mrs. Malfoy?” Hermione asked, voice so painfully formal that it stirred a physical sensation inside Draco, desperate to offer her his hand, or his arm, some kind of support. But the table stretched too long and she sat too far.

“We’ll be in France,” Narcissa said.

“I love France. Paris?”

“Yes, of course.”

Hermione smiled, held it in place several beats too long, and then looked down at her plate. She pushed a slice of chicken with her fork.

“Hermione’s family has vacationed in France several times—a favorite of theirs,” Draco tried.

Lucius’s brows lifted, meeting Draco’s eyes, before he pointedly did not respond. Narcissa only made the quietest of acknowledging noises. She glanced at Lucius, then back at Hermione. She offered a small smile and said, “How lovely.”

They weren’t even trying. He hadn’t expected a royal welcome, but something—anything—would have been more promising than condescending stares and implied eye rolls at Hermione’s attempts to converse and his attempts to prolong conversation as long as possible.

It struck him suddenly.

Draco wanted to scream. He wanted to crack the fucking dining room table straight down the center and leave them to clean up the mess. He looked at Hermione again, who still hadn’t torn her gaze from her plate, staring very intently at it as if a Cornish Hen might provide her with more successful conversation topics.

The many and varied things Draco wanted to say, needed to say, knocked and pounded and battered at his skull, demanding attention, demanding he pick one of them. Once upon a time, he would have pushed them back, silenced those wishful words, and suffered in silence.

This time would be different.

“Do you think—Mother, Father—that you might *try* to employ the outstanding social etiquette I know you are capable of? *We* are trying.”

Neither of them answered. But when Lucius’s silver met the tablecloth, both knife and fork returned to their resting positions—Draco realized only then that his father’s meal remained as uneaten as Hermione’s, as his own—he knew he’d said the wrong thing.

It had burst out of him: years and years of indignation, of offense he could no longer stomach. He’d regurgitated it, sour with bile and stinging his throat, all over their dinner table, effectively ruining their meal.

Lucius set his cloth serviette aside, pushed his china away, and placed his elbows on the table, fingers steepled just beneath his chin.

“Am I to take from this petulant outburst that the *outstanding social etiquette* we have employed in allowing this woman to join us at our dinner table on a holiday is not sufficient for your childish wants?”

Draco had a ring in a valet box back at their flat.

A future waiting for him. *After*. After a civil meal. He had to survive this, suffer this, for her. His throat had closed up, from shame or guilt or fury. He couldn't tell the feelings apart.

Narcissa filled the silence just as Draco broke his gaze from his father's grey glare to find Hermione, jaw clenched and looking just as shocked as Draco felt. Perhaps moreso: she'd been optimistic, after all.

“It's not—personal, Miss Granger. Not as it has been in the past. But the matters of an Estate”—Narcissa cleared her throat, a delicate sound—“Draco is our only child, and he carries two pureblood lineages in his veins, are you aware of that?”

Hermione's shoulders shifted, squaring, as she faced down Narcissa Malfoy in her own home.

“Yes, Mrs. Malfoy. I am aware of Draco's past, and of your implications.”

“You are not ignorant, then?” Lucius asked, dropping his forearms to the tabletop, fists forming. “You realize what you will cost him? Social status, a fortune, his family name. *Generations, centuries* of history and tradition? You know and you simply don't care? You wish to take my son from me? From his mother, his family?”

Draco suspected his father chose those words intentionally; he had to have known how deep they would cut. But even knowing they were likely said with intent, it still left Draco aching. He didn't want to lose the only familial support system he'd ever known. He didn't want to *have* to support himself financially, petulant as the thought might be. He didn't want to lose the opportunity to see his father's smile again, hear his mother's genuine laugh, realities that existed once, and surely, could exist again. But he felt all those things, all those wishes, slipping through his fingers like the sand in an hourglass.

And even as he thought those fatalistic thoughts, Hermione spoke: level, calm, with only the faintest trace of a quake around the edges.

“That’s why we’re here, Mr. Malfoy. This doesn’t have to be a zero sum game.”

“And what, pray tell, does that mean?” Lucius snapped.

Draco watched Hermione’s confidence falter, a flush rising up her chest. If he’d known the answer to Lucius’s question he would have jumped in. But Draco did not know what a zero sum game was, either.

“It’s—a theory, mathematical, I think—about gains and losses relative to—what I mean to say is that you can still have a relationship with Draco, regardless of his relationship with me.”

“How munificent of you, allowing us a relationship with our own son.”

“Lucius,” Narcissa began, perhaps an attempt to cut off the sharp turn towards a snarl his tone had taken. Her eyes were wide, volleying from one side of the table to the other: from her son to her husband.

Lucius continued, voice booming through the dining room. “He is my son. He is my *legacy*.” Lucius shifted his focus away from Hermione, landing on Draco. “I am fully prepared to revoke access to your accounts should this dalliance continue any longer. It has gone on long enough.”

Draco felt like he might be sick, white hot flames licking at the inside of his skin, boiling the contents of his stomach. Hermione sat back against her chair.

“Lucius,” Narcissa said again, her own voice sharp this time.

Lucius switched targets again, back to Hermione. “Do you have any idea, *girl*, what I’ve done to protect my son, to preserve this family? In the war alone—”

The flames pushed words from Draco’s throat, a dragon breathing syllables and sounds.

“The war? I was barely more than cannon fodder. You had me *branded* —”

“Some things couldn’t be helped—he would have *killed* us all.” The snarl that tore from Lucius’s throat felt more animal than human, the most visceral, the most vicious Draco had ever seen his father, war included.

Draco sucked in air, more fuel for the flames. He'd overheated: limbs charred, skin seared, bones burnt to a hollow crisp. If he didn't control it, he'd simply burn to ash.

The first time, it happened like this:

Draco wanted to believe his father. He wanted to believe that perhaps a sense of preservation, of wanting to keep all of them alive, drove him to make the many and varied terrible and unforgivable decisions he'd made during the war. Draco wanted to believe that the potential loss of his only son mattered as much to him as the uncharacteristically extreme emotion pouring from his face suggested.

Draco wanted the burning to stop.

After. If they could just reach *after*.

He had a ring in his valet box.

Occlumency came almost embarrassingly easy, as if waiting for its opportunity to freeze the flames. It took him by surprise, how easily he called upon it, encasing him in ice. He sank quickly, senses dulling, fires dying. Fog clouded his brain, blurring the bright lights of his anger, driving out impulses to shout, transforming it into an all encompassing will to survive.

He sank too far, too fast, completely dulled, errant emotion chipped away and discarded. He felt his posture settling, straight but relaxed. His fists unclenched, his chest, too. He inhaled. Exhaled. Met his father's eyes.

He wanted this to stop. Needed it to stop. His voice emerged from his throat as dull as his senses.

"I don't wish to argue, Father."

Lucius lifted his chin, muscles around his eyes tightening, evident even from a distance. Then, slowly, carefully, Lucius lifted his serviette from the table and draped it over his lap again.

That felt like peace. Or a ceasefire. Or a stalemate.

Draco looked to Hermione, confused in a dim corner of his mind over why her eyes looked misty, why she looked so devastatingly disappointed.

He only realized as she stood, inexplicably leaving the table, that he hadn't addressed the point Lucius made about his accounts: the ultimatum about their relationship.

He stumbled through the fog in his mind, seeking clear skies, heat flooding his system again, trying to melt his Occlumency.

This wasn't how he'd wanted this meal to go. Not even close.

He stood from his own seat, following after Hermione. But she had already gone. And he'd burned up.

Chapter End Notes

so many thanks to [Endless_musings](#), and [persephone_stone](#) for their tremendous support and friendship!

and to YOU, my lovely readers: sorry about this one...it had to be done. xD

(also thank you thank you thank you for your continued support for this story, y'all are fantastic!)

Chapter 37: -.083, -.166, -.250

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Part Four: 2005

“What might have been and what has been

Point to one end, which is always present.

Footfalls echo in the memory

Down the passage which we did not take

Towards the door we never opened.”

— T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*, *Burnt Norton*

—

January

tick tock tick tock tick tock tick tock

Entering their flat felt like stepping into a nightmare. Draco found Hermione sitting on their sofa: very still, very quiet, very calm.

Eerily calm.

Suspiciously calm.

She didn't look at him, eyes trained instead on her copy of *The Count of Monte Cristo* sitting on the coffee table, more decoration than reading material these days. She picked idly at a loose thread from a tufting button, winding and rolling it between her fingers.

Heat surged, a column of fire climbing Draco's spine as he emerged from his Occlumency. He found his discarded pieces: shame, guilt, fear, avoidance. He fused them together, forcing out the cold, forcing

away the fog.

“I didn’t mean anything by it,” he said, taking one cautious step towards her. “You know I didn’t.” He felt a swell of pride that his last statement hadn’t sounded like a question. It could have. Once upon a time, it might have. But it didn’t. Not now. Not when it counted.

“I know,” she said. She picked her book up off the table, fingers grazing the cover in a reverent, longing sort of way.

“Then why?”

Why did she look so heartbroken?

Why did she leave?

Why wouldn’t she look at him?

Crookshanks hopped onto the sofa, settling into her lap as she held the book in one hand.

“I don’t—I can’t talk about it right now.”

“Hermione—”

“I’m going to bed.” She croaked the words. Painful, strangled sounding.

She set the book aside, scooped Crookshanks into her arms, and left for the bedroom. She didn’t look at him once. Draco watched her back as she disappeared down the hall, frustration boiling from the resurging heat in his blood.

He spent the next hour sitting on the sofa, welding back together every last shard he’d let shatter during dinner, every inconvenient emotion he’d hidden from. He let the heat consume him. And by the time he ambled into the bedroom, he felt worn and damp, slicked with a sheen of sweat from the physical effort of reassembling all the pieces he’d scattered in his attempt to survive Lucius’s wrath.

He crawled into bed, careful not to disturb her, unable to decide if he hoped she was still awake or already sleeping. She didn’t move or react when he finally settled against his pillow. His limbs felt stiff and foreign, his side of the bed a claustrophobic coffin keeping him contained.

He barely breathed, didn’t move, willing himself to find sleep as he

listened to her breathing, finding the answer to his earlier curiosity. She hadn't fallen asleep yet, either.

They spent the next several days in a cautious, quiet *détente*—Draco felt reasonably confident he used the term correctly. They orbited each other politely, never engaging in the conversation Hermione seemed as of yet incapable of having.

They spent New Year's with Theo and Blaise like they'd planned: an uncomfortable affair made awkward by the strained silence that seemed to hover around Draco and Hermione like a storm cloud, thunder poised to clap.

He still had a ring in his valet box.

The day after New Year's, the coldest start to a January Draco could remember, it finally came to a head over breakfast.

He passed a mug of tea across the table to Hermione, pulse in his throat the same way it had been for the last week of his quiet, subdued existence.

"I know you didn't mean anything by it," she said, taking the mug.

He swallowed, then remembered to breathe.

"Then why won't you talk to me? I shouldn't have used Occlumency; I realized almost as soon as I did it."

"It's not—that's not it. I don't love that you turned to it, but that's not—do you know what I saw? When you and your father were having it out?"

A muscle in Draco's back twinged, alerting him to the fact that he'd been standing partly bent over the kitchen table, not having moved a muscle since the moment she started speaking, still frozen part-way between handing off her tea and taking his seat.

He pulled out his chair, sensing a strange hollowness opening up in his stomach, anticipation of what she might say next. He didn't know what she saw, and from her tone, he wasn't sure he wanted to. He

wrapped two fingers through the handle of his own mug, using it to ground him in the kitchen with her, in whatever came next. He swallowed.

“What did you see?”

“Your heart breaking. I could see it happening. I could see you imagining yourself losing them and *then* you chose to hide from it and it’s—” She broke off, tapping the side of her mug, cheeks puffed out as she exhaled a big breath. She looked up at him. “It’s okay that you sometimes use Occlumency to manage more difficult situations; I don’t begrudge you for that. I know it’s part of who you are and how you—cope. It was everything that came before that. I can’t be responsible for that look.” Her voice wavered, sticky and thick. “I didn’t realize it was still this bad. I suppose I’d hoped...with time, that—things had softened.”

“That’s—not what I was thinking at all. And regardless, just because losing them will hurt doesn’t mean that I’m not willing to do that for you.”

“I don’t *want* you to do that for me.” She looked down at her mug.

If he’d forgone the strainer, perhaps her tea leaves would give her a clue to whatever she sought inside her cup. Perhaps if she believed in divination, she would have taken its advice. But he had not left the tea leaves, and she wouldn’t have read them if he did.

She looked back up, a tear escaping from the corner of her eye, a quick stream down her face, where it curled beneath her chin.

“What if I did anyway?” he asked.

He had a ring in his valet box.

Her jaw tensed. She shook her head, features collapsing into something more than sadness, more than agony. “It wouldn’t make a difference. I think I’d be more upset if you disregarded my wishes.”

“So then where does that leave us, Hermione? I don’t—I don’t really understand what’s happening.” The back of his throat felt tight, raw; he didn’t know if he needed to swallow or scream.

She wiped the tear. Cleared her throat. Dragged a nail down her ceramic mug and tapped it on the table: three times.

Draco held his mug, lowered it to the tabletop, three slow taps.

They needed help, both of them, needed an escape from this conversation. Her eyes stuck on his mug; another tear rolled down her cheek. She tapped the table three more times and then immediately wiped her tears away.

She rolled her lips between her teeth, a slight tremble, before she met his eyes again.

“I—I’m going to find myself a flat, I think.”

Draco heart jolted so suddenly, so violently, that he wondered if the world had stopped turning, if inertia had catapulted his insides against his skin and bones, obliteration on impact.

Rational, complex thought slipped from his ears, leaving only the stupidest of questions behind to voice: “Why?”

Redness crawled up the sides of her neck as several new tears made a waterfall of her face, a burst of grief spilling from her eyes.

“Please don’t make me say it.”

He’d never heard her voice pitch like that, so close to a plea, a whine: words forced through vocal cords that refused to open, as if they, too, resisted the words being breathed into existence.

“Well *I’m* not going to say it.”

“We can’t— *I* can’t.” Her voice caught.

“I give you permission. Destroy whatever of mine you want, Hermione. My family, my bank accounts, my legacy. Just not this. Hermione, not this.”

He was halfway to standing before he even realized he’d moved. She stood just as abruptly.

“Hermione—”

She shook her head, face twisted in misery as she bent over, scooping Crookshanks into her arms. She looked at him again.

He’d studied her expressions for years, memorized the look of them, the feel of them, the meaning of every last configuration. But anguish distorted her. He could see her pain almost as clearly as he felt his

own, but he couldn't see through it, to whatever lay underneath. She turned away.

Draco couldn't move as she walked out of the kitchen. It took several seconds of standing dumbly at the table for the events of the past minute to catch up to him. He leapt into action after her, following her path to the living room, finding her at the fireplace.

His heart, which might have stopped for several minutes there, thundered back to life, inundating his bloodstream with adrenaline, with *anger*.

“What the fuck, Hermione? You can't honestly—what are you *doing*? You can't really believe that this is for the best. Hermione—”

He blinked against the flash of green light, barely registering as she spoke the Potters' address and vanished with her cat—which had become something of his cat, too—in a swirl of Floo magic.

Draco took a single, deep breath through his nose. Realized he still held his mug of tea. Threw it. Smashed into thousands of tiny pieces against the brick fireplace. He took another breath, gathered himself, and grabbed a handful of powder to follow.

The Floo spat him back out. She'd locked the connection from theirs to the Potters'.

No matter.

Draco Floo'd to Theo's, didn't even bother announcing his arrival, and immediately turned around to Floo after her from this different point of origin.

The Floo spat him back out again.

Stupid fucking brilliant woman.

He Floo'd back to his. Then tried Weasley's in what he had to admit was a very, very low moment in his life.

The Floo spat him back out *again*. She must have locked it entirely, no options for entry.

“Are you kidding me?” he shouted, launching the Floo pot across the living room. Green sparkling powder rained down in the prettiest sort of dust storm he could imagine. He hated it.

Draco stood in his living room, shimmering powder settling around him, trying to control the cadence of his breathing, oscillating wildly between far too fast and dangerously slow.

He slammed his eyes shut, drawing upon every last happy memory he had, shoving away a cruel voice that told him his reserves now had a limit and that the memories he called upon wouldn't be replenished.

Magic unfurled from his chest, tendrils of happiness, of hope, seeking his extremities.

“Expecto Patronum.”

Light fluttered, stuttered, and died.

He tried again; he could do this now—had been able to do it for a whole year—one fight wouldn't take it from him.

He let the magic uncoil itself for longer, pouring memory after memory into the curling wisps beneath his skin until they pushed against his fingertips, demanding release.

He cast the spell again, momentarily shocked to see his Patronus bursting from his wand.

In his rush to conjure the thing, he hadn't thought of what he'd say. What could he? Hermione didn't seem interested in talking, had said everything she wanted to say. Now, staring eye to eye with his chimaera, a cobbled together creature for his cobbled together life, all he could think to say to the woman ripping him to shreds was: “Please. Come home.”

—

Hermione did not come home.

Draco stopped trying to follow. His owls went unanswered. His Patronuses grew weaker by the day. The Floo mocked him.

She wouldn't even answer to Theo, who'd tried to step in and redeem some of his goodwill as her friend, trying to make sense of the madness between them.

It took several days for Draco to accept that sitting in his living room and staring at the Floo wouldn't yield him any results. As much as every twitch and flex of his muscles demanded that he bolt out his door and traverse muggle London straight to Harry Potter's house on foot, he employed the last bit of his withering self-control to respect that if she wanted space, she would not appreciate his presence.

Respecting it didn't preclude him from being driven slightly mad by it.

He started brewing to occupy his mind, lest he allow the madness to fester by wondering what it would take to bring her back, how much time she might need, what he could do to set things right. His shop needed stock and he needed something to do.

He nearly upended an entire cauldron when he heard a rush of flames from the fireplace. He might have been embarrassed by the speed with which he rushed into the living room if not for the fact that he'd moved so quickly he couldn't spare even a second to consider such things.

Nor could he bring himself to feel embarrassment for the way his face must have fallen, so enormously, so tragically, upon finding the Weaslette standing in his living room.

"I'm not happy to be here, either," she said as a greeting.

"Then why are you here?"

He still had a vial of newt's liver in his hands. He'd left his wand on the brewer's bench.

"I have a list." She tucked several strands of her ginger hair behind her ear before holding up a piece of parchment. "Her things I'm supposed to collect."

"Not brave enough to come do it herself?" he snapped, fury fluttering in his chest, drowning out the disappointment, the debilitating pain.

"Couldn't stop crying long enough."

Draco's stomach sank, a terrible chill blooming behind his ribs. He stared at Ginny, unspeaking, unmoving, trying to process what she'd just said.

A muscle in his jaw twitched and he realized he'd been clenching it, yet he made no move to release the pressure. Instead he turned, teeth

ground together, chest absolutely aching, and excused himself to the bedroom. He slammed the door behind him with enough force that it jostled Hermione's tray of jewelry atop the dresser, just next to his valet box.

He held his breath, listening, and when he heard the Weaslette start charming things down to a more manageable size for moving, he took several heavy steps to the bed and sat on the side of it: her side, the right side.

Draco tried to hold himself together, but something inside his chest had started ascending, winding its way around his esophagus, his trachea, choking him. Higher still, into his sinuses, stinging, into his temples, throbbing. He folded, dropping his head into his hands, hovering between his knees as he sat on the side of the bed.

What would imminently be the side of the bed *formerly* belonging to Hermione, it would seem.

Despite the sensation of being battered by waves, crushing him against a rocky shore, a strange sort of laugh forced its way through his tight throat.

Because *of course* Hermione would itemize her breakup with a list of her possessions. *Of course*.

He'd been stuck forcing that strangled laugh back down his throat when he heard the knock at his door, and then it opened anyway.

"I have a list for in here, too," Weaslette said, looking grim and determined and like her limbs might lock in place if she stood any straighter.

Draco lifted a hand, gave a short wave that said *do what you must* and let it fall again, unfolding himself so that he sat straight. He might as well preserve whatever modicum of dignity he had left after being found with his head in his hands.

Ginny worked efficiently, which he appreciated, making liberal use of *accio* to summon the things from Hermione's list. He watched, helplessly, throat threatening to close up, as the little bits of life she'd left in their room, from books to clothes to jewelry, all found their way into the series of shrunken boxes.

In what could have been no time, or perhaps all the time in the world, holes appeared where Hermione's belongings used to live as Ginny

sent the remaining boxes floating into the corridor.

He had to force his words, dry and croaking.

“Will you just—ask her to speak with me?” The unpleasant sensation behind his ribs, the lacking, the hole not unlike the ones left by Hermione’s belongings, flushed as he spoke, buoyed by finally saying something after sitting in silence and watching his home be stripped of every last reminder of her life there.

He flushed hot, angry, furious that Hermione sent Ginny fucking Potter to scrub his life of her presence. “She won’t speak to me,” he ground out when he realized that Ginny hadn’t moved. “We’re adults, we can—we just need to talk.”

All of the Weaslette’s stiff tension seemed to disintegrate, limbs falling limp beside her. Her eyes softened: pity. That was worse.

“I’ll tell her you’d like to talk.”

He swallowed his impulse to shout. He needed her to leave; he’d reached his limit on how long he could stomach a conversation about Hermione with someone who was not her.

“Perhaps leave out the part where you found me wallowing in the bedroom.”

“I’m definitely leaving that part out.”

Draco couldn’t decide if she intended to say something else, just standing in the threshold to his bedroom, watching him. Perhaps she didn’t know if he intended to say anything else, either, both stuck waiting.

Finally, she gave him a brief nod and stepped towards the door.

A Malfoy eagle owl rapped on the window. Draco flinched but didn’t move. The Weaslette paused, looking towards the source of the sound. The bird rapped again and Draco did nothing.

“Are you going to get that?”

“It’s from my parents.”

She crossed her arms, lifting a brow as if to show him exactly how unsatisfying she found his response. “The question remains.”

“I have nothing to say to them.”

Ginny looked at him for several more raps at the window before she finally turned to leave. Draco heard the sound of the Floo, let out a rushing breath at almost the same volume, and dropped his head into his hands again, unwilling to look too closely at the gaps in his flat left by Hermione’s departure.

The rush of anger that overtook Draco while talking to Ginny festered. It spread. It grew legs and ran away with his rational thinking, leaving only a blind sort of rage in its wake wherein Draco literally could not believe that Hermione had done this to him.

He grew impatient as he grew angry. He deserved something more than the flimsy excuse of a conversation they’d had at their breakfast table before she vanished. Two more weeks had passed and *nothing*.

He tried sending another Patronus, focusing on the good memories, not letting the bad ones, the imperfect ones, the fear that he was quickly gobbling up the last of his happiness get in the way. His happiness felt weak, shredded and dry and unwilling—or perhaps incapable—of unfurling from the center of his chest. It stuck stubbornly to his bones, clinging.

He failed to produce a Patronus. He did not try again. As much as she might have hated it, so much of his happiness had been tied to her. He hadn’t gone this long without speaking to her in years. Even before they were together, during that tentative, strange year they spent working side by side while he’d been betrothed to Astoria, she’d still been a regular part of his life.

In her absence, the emptiness—the quietness—genuinely astonished him.

He almost started reorganizing his books on several occasions, but stopped just as he started. He found himself unwilling to fill up the spaces left behind by her missing contributions to what had so recently been *their* collection.

He thought about fully moving his potions set-up to the shop, but

couldn't shake the memory of Hermione telling him how much she liked watching him brew.

He found every last one of their tea strainers left in a kitchen drawer; she hadn't taken a single one, even though he'd purchased at least two specifically for her.

He couldn't escape the ghost of her, haunting the spaces she took up in a former life.

Mostly, he spent his time between tasks living in a sort of angry limbo wherein he kept expecting her to come to her senses and return home. He'd been marinating on that particular thought as he tried to blur the finer edges of his pain with a bottle of scotch, when someone yet again stepped through his Floo unannounced.

But not just anyone: Hermione.

Of course she would decide to show up on an evening he was already several drinks deep into his attempt to forget her face and her curls and the way she flushed bright pink from her chest to her cheeks when she came.

His posture straightened in the black leather wingback next to the fireplace. For a moment, his presence went unseen, seated just outside her periphery. He felt peculiar, uneasy, seeing her and not being seen by her. Something about it made his skin crawl.

He cleared his throat, almost guilty over the way she jumped and spun, finding him behind her.

"Hi," he said, still sitting. Still holding his drink. Still desperate to reach for her and resisting every impulse to do so.

"Hi." She took a small step away, maintaining a minimum amount of space between them, it would seem. "How are you?"

The liquor made him laugh, and it came out far crueler than he intended. But he couldn't take it back, not even as he saw her recoiling from the way it struck her skin.

"Okay," she said. "I know. Not a good question." Her voice wobbled, strained.

Draco didn't know if he was meant to say something. Didn't know what to say, if he was.

He said nothing.

“Are you going to be okay?” she asked.

“Are you going to come back home?”

She took another step away, a small stagger. The back of her calf hit the coffee table, she jolted slightly from the impact. Too skittish, easily startled. She had nerves of her own.

“Draco—I can’t. No.”

“I’ve cut them out. I haven’t even spoken to them since Christmas, and the thing I’m upset about is *you*, not them.” He stood, gauging her reaction, watching as her legs pressed against the table behind her, a silent plea for more space. She didn’t want him anywhere near her. His stomach twisted.

He stayed by his chair.

“They’re never going to accept me,” she said, and he could hear the way the words cracked inside her throat. That strange, uncomfortable, instantly sympathetic sound of something trying to speak through an impending urge to cry.

“They don’t have to.”

“I don’t want you to lose them—”

“Fuck—Hermione—that’s a shit excuse and you know it.” He couldn’t help himself, powered by a rush of bravery bound to the liquor in his blood, Draco stepped right up into her personal space. So close, he could practically taste her intake of breath. “I’ve had nearly a month to try and make sense of that pathetic logic. I understand you don’t want me to lose my family, but that’s not enough. It’s just *not enough* to walk away from me. To move out of our flat. To barely even *speak* to me.”

She didn’t look at him, staring instead at his shirt, clenched jaw warring with the watery look in her eyes. She didn’t speak.

Draco forced himself to take a small step back, so that he could really look at her, force her to look at him. His scowl pulled his brows together so tightly that the muscles bunching above the bridge of his nose ached from the sustained tension.

"I deserve a real fucking answer, Hermione. I want to *marry* you. I want to have a *family* with you. I want to spend every fucking day of my life with you and you won't even talk to me."

"Because it's selfish." She lifted her gaze from his shirt to his eyes. Her impending tears looked more angry than sad.

"Can't be more selfish than not telling me at all."

"I can't come in second to Lucius Malfoy."

She looked away again when she said it.

"What?" His throat felt thick again. All the things he might say, choking him.

"I saw it. In your eyes. Whether you know it or not. You *crave* his approval and I'm afraid you always will."

"You can't know that—I told you, I don't even want them in my life if they can't accept—"

"I can't come in second to Lucius Malfoy," she said again. More resolved this time. He almost expected her to stomp her foot as proof of just how serious she intended to be. "You are the most important person in my life, Draco. But I'm not the most important person in yours."

That should have hurt more than it did. Instead, it flooded Draco with fury. How dare she. How *could* she?

"You cannot possibly mean that."

"Your actions are what count, Draco. I've watched you drag your feet for *years* on anything resembling conflict with him, and I—I understand; he's your father. I don't *want* you to lose him. But I think you don't want to lose him more. And I—it's selfish, but I wanted to be the most important person in your life, even if I had to share you with them. And the fact that I'm not, that I haven't been—" she broke off, a sob tearing from her throat.

His anger tasted like scotch. Like lingering Floo cinders in the air. Like bile.

He had to take another step back. Not for her this time, but for him. She was an idiot. Possibly the smartest idiot he'd ever met if she

honestly believed all that.

“How can I convince you that everything you just said is complete shit?”

“It’s selfish, I told you. But it’s not shit. Do you have any idea how hard it’s been to watch you pine for a man who hates me? Who once very literally wanted me dead? Where do you draw the line between what hatred you’re willing to tolerate and what you aren’t? I worry, Draco, that you never will. It’s been *years*.”

She barely gave her tears a breath to fall before she wiped them away with furious swipes beneath her lids, as if she wouldn’t dare allow herself to cry over this.

She spoke again before he’d even had the chance to fully register what she’d said.

“I went to the bookstore today.” A pause. “I got to Eliot.”

Draco’s heart sank, fully sank. Through the floorboards. Through the dirt. Straight to the center of the earth where molten rock might melt him down and make him something new, something with no recollection of this moment.

He’d forgotten to order more stock. He’d been so wrapped up in waiting for her to come back that he’d forgotten about everything else outside of brewing for his shop.

She pulled a book from her bag: the one.

“I didn’t want to get to it,” she said, looking mournfully at the thing in her hands. “And now that I have...”

“Looks like you finally won, Granger.”

Behind her, the tufted green velvet sofa *popped* out of existence. Hermione turned at the sound.

“Where—”

“Gone to your place of residence, I assume. We made a magically binding wager, after all.”

“I’ll give it back.”

“Don’t—you won.” He didn’t have anything left in him to fight with

her about a bloody sofa, too. He didn't care, couldn't bring himself to.

"I can't keep it."

"Well, you can't bring it back here. Not unless you're coming with it and don't intend to leave again."

Predictably, painfully, she had no response to that.

When she left, Draco sank into his armchair under the weight of an overwhelming, terrible suspicion that he might never see her or that sofa again.

—

Draco didn't sleep for over two days. He alternated between a semi-catatonic impression of a statue, sitting at his kitchen table and staring into a persistently lukewarm cup of tea, and manically brewing as many potions as he could to stock the shop.

He spent far too many hours dwelling exclusively on his last conversation with Hermione—playing it over and over and over again in his head. And far more hours still, focused on diverting his thoughts from coming to the same horrible conclusion; she wasn't coming home.

He couldn't understand how they'd ended up here. He knew she didn't want this. *He* certainly didn't want it. And somehow, it had happened anyway. She spoke so confidently about *seeing it in his eyes*. Well, he'd seen it in hers, too. She hurt just as badly. She thought she was protecting him from something, and in turn, protecting herself from him. He hadn't yet decided which component of that terrible quagmire devastated him the most.

When he ran out of ingredients for his potions, ran out of willpower to remain awake and avoid the nightmares he knew would plague him, Draco downed a Dreamless Sleep and fell into bed. He didn't rejoin the land of the living for so long that when he finally woke, his bones ached, stiff from such prolonged time spent unmoving, dead to the world.

Draco stared at the ceiling. Blue light trickled in through the drawn

curtains, a suggestion of early morning. He'd always thought the room sounded so quiet in the mornings, nothing but soft breathing, a rustle of sheets, and if he was very lucky, tiny whimpers pressed against his lips.

Those fleeting memories had been so loud by comparison, a cacophony. This new quiet threatened to swallow him whole.

A year ago, they were having a party, celebrating a coming together, welcoming Hermione into his home, which became their home. It had been a loud, vibrant, exciting endeavor. Now, with enough focus, he could hear the subtle hum of his wards—her wards—and the flat's warming charms, things he'd never been able to hear before.

He forced himself out of bed and trudged a well-worn path to the kettle, still thinking about the party that had officially welcomed Hermione into his day-to-day. He glanced at the balcony as he passed it, thoughts catching on another memory from that night: a conversation with Theo—slightly unhinged, definitely drunk—about a time turner, and change, and how Draco might feel if something ever happened that he wanted to change.

Draco had something he wanted to change.

Needed to change.

Had no idea if he *could* change.

What would it be? The dinner?

He realized he'd stopped moving, standing beneath the archway that divided the kitchen from the living room, eyes locked on a closed balcony door.

The dinner.

If he just had five minutes—no, he would need longer than that to get in, unseen, to do something *different*. He barely paused to consider his actions, marching straight to the Floo, grabbing a handful of powder, and spinning away to the Nott Estate. He realized upon landing that he wore only pajama bottoms and a robe. Theo would never let him live it down.

Draco spent almost ten minutes trying to conjure a Patronus to get Theo's attention inside his workshop. Eventually, he gave up and started banging on the door, shouting at the top of his lungs. He considered blowing the corridor windows out just for effect, wondering if *that* might finally pull Theo from his family vault-turned-workshop where he was undoubtedly toiling away making portkeys to any number of places.

"Are you drunk?" Theo asked in greeting, finally emerging from the same passageway that had once tried to suffocate Draco.

"It's"—Draco cast a *tempus*—" 7:45 in the morning."

"Oh—it's the morning, then? But still, not an unreasonable question—it's been a rough month."

"I'm not drunk, Theo."

"Did you need to get drunk?"

"Merlin, Theo. It's 7:45 in the morning—"

"Just trying to gauge where your head is." Theo lifted his hands in defense, holding very still as if to convey he meant no harm. With a casual flick of his wand, he spelled the door and hinged painting leading to his workshop shut.

"My head is—Theo—you asked me once. If I ever thought about using it. Theo, I need it."

"Do you see why I asked if you were drunk? I can see your pectorals and you're not making any sense."

Draco wrapped his robe more tightly around his torso, not having realized the belt had come undone. Theo started walking down the corridor without so much as a backward glance to confirm that Draco followed.

"If you're not drunk, what are you exactly?" Theo asked, lifting his voice and projecting it over his shoulder to where Draco hurried to catch up. "Can't say I expected to end my day like this."

"End your day? Theo, no"—he fell into stride beside him—"I'm desperate. That's what I am. I fucked up and I kept—I keep—trying to

maintain the peace and didn't *do* anything. I need the time turner."

Theo didn't immediately respond, a slight twitch to his step as he kept walking—towards the East Wing kitchens, Draco assumed—until he finally stopped just shy of their destination. Theo turned, brows furrowed. He took a breath and opened his mouth to speak.

Draco cut him off.

"I just don't know how to make it work. It gives us five minutes, yeah? And then paradox avoidance? Theo how can I fix five minutes of a dinner that lasted nearly an hour without...breaking the laws of the universe?"

Theo closed his mouth and tilted his head. Just when Draco thought he might provide an answer, he gave his head a small shake and stepped into the kitchens, summoning Milly for a meal. He turned, leaning against the island with his arms crossed.

"You can't."

"That's—not what—Theo, I need to."

"It's not that precise, Draco. I modified it so that it can travel in either years or hours, and I suppose we could use fractional turns to pinpoint as best we can but—"

"So it *can* be done?"

Theo dropped his arms, accepting the tea Milly delivered to him.

"Draco, you can't just drop into the middle of a meal where you—already are. Paradox avoidance can only go so far."

Milly offered Draco an apple he didn't have the heart to decline. He held it loosely in one hand, fighting off a sudden urge to launch it across the room just to watch it explode against the wall.

"And what if I just marched into that dining room anyway? What if I just went in and told her I've used a time turner to fix an error and—"

"You think I'm going to let you use it if *that's* your plan? Draco. We used it once and I still can't"—he set his tea down, rubbed the back of his neck—"I still wonder."

"And look where that one use got us," Draco urged, trying to force Theo into understanding.

Theo sighed. “Did you—was there a time that you left the table at all?”

“I need more than five minutes.”

Theo pursed his lips, drew a breath through flared nostrils, looked very near shaking Draco by the shoulders, and then finally unscrewed his features.

“Draco,” he began. In a world where Theodore Nott used a patient, almost exasperated tone with Draco, he knew he’d probably pushed too far. “I’m not—I know I’m good, but—I’ve already modified it to operate in years instead of just hours. I’ve modified it to operate outside a clean loop of time, to start *new timelines*. I’ve modified it to bring the user back to their starting point after five minutes have elapsed. And now you want me to extend that?”

“Give me thirty. I can use it right at my fireplace, right before we leave. Hermione came out of the bedroom after me—she kept fussing with her hair. Paradox avoidance will—it will take care of the issue of the other me. It did so the first time we used it. Remember? I was meant to be in the parlor already, but when my father opened the door for us that version of me just—well, I wasn’t there anymore.”

Theo lifted a brow. But he hadn’t officially, entirely, or exactly said no. Not yet.

“You know exactly what time that was?”

Draco laughed, surprising himself with its force.

“Of course. She writes down all her engagements. She has a planner. She made me check it several times before we left.”

Theo sighed again and it sounded so remarkably like victory that Draco couldn’t resist the bout of fresh hope that swelled. He tossed the apple from one hand to the other several times, burning off anxious energy.

“This is what I get for inventing a new type of time turner,” Theo finally said.

“Please. I’m willing to beg. I have to fix this.”

“Would she want you to?”

Draco fumbled catching the apple, surprised by Theo's question; it landed on the tiles with a thud, rolling away.

"I—it's not just for her." He could feel the defensive creep pitching in his tone. "I mean, it is for her. But it's for me too, you know. I let my father win again. I *always* let him win. And look what it's cost me."

Draco wasn't sure that he breathed as he waited for Theo to respond.

"Give me some time. I'll see what I can do."

Chapter End Notes

two things:

first, thank you so much for reading! i'm sorry for how much this one hurts. we're gonna get through this together!

and second, yes, the time turner is a very bad not good also morally repulsive idea. that's the point. draco's got some serious learning to do.

Chapter 38: 000, -.083, -.166

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

February

tick tock tick tock tick tock tick tock

Draco hired several clerks to work in the shop despite Blaise's not-so-subtle suggestions that they shouldn't expand their staff, at least not until they had a few months of business under their belts. Draco countered with a reminder that the plan had never been for either of them to work with customers: Blaise would manage the books, Draco would brew the stock. No customer should ever have to deal with either of their faces, Draco's especially.

That logic fit nicely with Draco's inconveniently-timed inability to focus on the thing he'd spent years trying to bring to life. Apart from the catharsis he found brewing stock and not *thinking* about anything else, he struggled to even walk into the shop, knowing that most of the reason he'd opened it to begin with had been his own financial independence. It had been for him, but it had also been for her.

The air shifted around Draco—an odd angle, a different texture, a bit of a swirl—before it stabilized. He turned to find Theo standing just inside the doorway to his home potions lab, antique key clutched in one hand, eyes screwed shut. Slowly, Theo opened one eye, then the other.

“Oh, excellent. I've survived.”

It was a phrase Draco might have found alarming several years earlier, before Theo's descent into experimenting with portkey modifications and testing them on himself—and others—as if that were a perfectly safe thing to do.

“Portkey inside a building?”

“Both coming and going, *and* I didn't come here first to plot the destination in person. I used some roundabout location techniques—”

“Theo—I’m normally quite interested in your mad magical experimenting, but I’m hoping you’re here for a reason.” Draco cast several stasis charms on his cauldrons, trying to suppress the surge of anxiety that welled in his chest, crowding out the space behind his ribs with terrible anticipation. He’d seen very little of Theo since their early morning discussion of time travel mechanics and the promise that Theo would *see what he could do*.

Theo’s running list of magical modifications halted. He cleared his throat.

“Right.” He reached into his cloak’s interior pocket, procuring the time turner Draco had only seen in person once before, but that had taken up so much space inside his head.

It swung on a gold chain: a tiny hourglass in a metal cage.

“I did what you asked,” Theo said, letting the implications hang between them with the swaying time turner.

“Thirty minutes?”

“Should be. Since it only travels in time, not space, it has to be used in the exact place you want to be when you travel. And”—Theo dragged his opposite hand through his short hair, grabbing at the roots—“if it’s being used to travel in years or fractions of years, it would need to be used at the exact time and day of the month someone would want to travel to. I can’t seem to get it more precise than that. So, if *someone* needed to attend a six o’clock dinner on the twenty-fifth of December, *someone* would need to use it at six o’clock on the twenty-fifth of whatever month they’re travelling from, you see.”

“Someone?”

“I’m being intentionally vague.”

“Why?”

“Because I still haven’t decided if I should let you use it.”

“Theo—”

“I know, I know. *Of course* I’m going to let you use it; I’ve been working on it for almost a month. I just—” he broke off and thrust the turner closer to Draco, as he looked pointedly in a different direction. Perhaps not bearing witness made it easier for Theo.

Draco reached out, closed his fist around the chain, and waited with an arched brow for Theo to let go. After a series of what looked like calming breaths, Theo did. The top of the chain dangled limply onto Draco's closed fist.

"So. The twenty-fifth, then?" Theo asked.

It took Draco a moment to catch up with the question, stare fixed on the glinting golden object dangling from his hand: the power to change.

The twenty-fifth of December, Christmas day. The dinner with his parents.

"Hermione and I stepped through the Floo five minutes before six."

Theo nodded. "I want to be here. In case—just to be safe."

"Sure," Draco said, suddenly feeling rather numb, rather surreal, like none of this was really happening. Three days separated them from the twenty-fifth of February. In three days, at five minutes to six, he would stand in front of his fireplace using the object in his hands to do—something. Anything. Everything.

—

After three days of nearly no sleep, constantly thinking about what he would do, and a persistent headache that told him he needed to take better care of his body before it collapsed beneath him, Draco stood in front of his fireplace in the exact same outfit he'd worn two months prior. He watched the clock as Theo hovered nervously in his periphery.

"It's set to today's date?" Theo asked for the fourth time in the last five minutes.

"Yes, Theo—"

"It's important—so it knows how long the months are."

"You've mentioned."

"And you must be extremely precise. One month is only .083

repeating of a full turn, it's a very small movement. And you're only going two months—pay very close attention to the notches I've made on the frame around the hourglass—”

“Theo, I know.”

“Why aren't you more nervous?”

“I am. Why are you so nervous?”

“This is very illegal.”

“So are your portkeys.”

“This is Azkaban illegal. Not fines. Not community service. Not probation. You know that right? You will never see anything beyond a prison cell again if this goes badly.”

“It won't go badly, Theo. You're brilliant. This is going to work.”

Theo did not seem convinced, alternating between wringing his hands and crossing his arms. They both stared at the grandfather clock in the corner of the living room.

“One minute,” Theo said, announcing what Draco already knew. He hadn't torn his eyes from the ticking second hand since quarter-til. “Reverse spin, .166 of a full turn.” Theo's voice came out barely a whisper, a final repetition of the instructions he'd been yammering since he arrived.

“I'll be careful,” Draco offered, knowing it wouldn't help.

He saw Theo nodding from the corner of his eye, still fixated on the clock. “Just don't let Lucius win, yeah?”

“Never again.”

Five minutes until six.

Draco would have preferred that his hands had been completely steady. Rather, they shook, nerves prickling beneath his skin and hijacking his fine motor skills.

He lifted the turner to eye level and, with a deep breath, unlocked the hourglass from its resting position. He turned it, barely a move at all, until the two notches on the frame were just aligned—representative of two months of a full year.

The world spun. He'd forgotten how it felt: like cotton in his ears and film over his eyes. Blurred and stretched and disorienting until suddenly—normal.

He turned his head to the left; Theo had vanished.

The flat *smelled* different: less stale, more living.

He turned further, finding the green tufted sofa sitting in the room with him. Crookshanks sat perched atop it, head cocked to one side as if his little feline senses *knew*.

“Alright, it’s as smooth as I’m going to get it—”

Draco’s heart nearly stopped, a painful lurch behind his ribs that felt like a bad portkey, or a muggle movie.

Hermione emerged from the corridor, looking far more nervous than he remembered, hands twisting at the ends of her long curls clipped in a half-up style.

It took his breath away, seeing her, not having her look at him with those eyes that did nothing to mask her disappointment and her grief. He thought he’d prepared himself for the inevitability of seeing her, seeing her in a version—a time—of his life where she hadn’t vanished entirely.

Gods, he’d missed her.

Gods, he loved her.

He wouldn’t let his father reduce him to the kind of man she didn’t want in her life, the kind of man he didn’t want to be. Not again, not anymore.

“You look beautiful,” he breathed, words rushing out of him before he could even consider if they were the ones he intended to speak. Already, a difference from the original timeline. He’d not told her that, then. What were the consequences to telling her she was beautiful, to loving her as he did?

She stopped, a misstep, head tilted as she smiled, one curl still knotted around her knuckle.

“Thank you. You look—are you alright? You look a bit peaky, actually.”

He almost laughed. He probably looked like he'd lost some weight and hadn't seen the sun in several weeks. He rallied, forced the hammering inside his chest to calm; he had thirty minutes.

But he could be allowed one small moment, couldn't he?

He stepped forward, heart stuttering again as she lifted her hands to skate up his chest: so easy, so natural. That ease pulled him the rest of the way in, head dipping, a near kiss. Her fingers continued their ascent, wrapping around the back of his neck, dragging through his hair.

He wanted to kiss her, desperately so, but something in the pit of his stomach held him a breath away, simply savoring this opportunity at nearness. He'd known how much loving could hurt; he'd learned that early on. But he'd forgotten some of the fear. It surged now, such a close reminder of what he had to lose.

"It's going to go well," Hermione said. Her beautiful fingers sent sparks shooting down his spine.

He lifted his hand, placed it atop hers against the back of his neck. "Just because you're displeased with your hair, doesn't mean you should ruin mine."

What an easy thing to say, things he missed saying.

She smiled and it solidified his resolve, crystalizing his amorphous *wants* and *needs* to *fix* into the strategy he'd spent the last few weeks ruminating over, torturing himself with.

He offered her his arm and they stepped through the Floo: a dizzying blur of green, the feel of her hand gripping his forearm.

If he had an eternity and not just thirty minutes, he might never let her go.

Instead, he clenched his jaw as they followed Topsy to the dining room, dread swelling like a growing wave in his stomach, carrying him towards a crash against the shore.

"You seem tense—well, more tense," Hermione said, offering a pulse of pressure against his arm as they walked. He barely faltered, but he felt certain she noticed. He hadn't expected the repetition to hit him quite so hard. He'd known it would happen, after all, but hearing her voice the same concern for his tension that she had the first time he'd

been here stung in his sinuses.

“I love you,” he said as they walked, having no other excuse or explanation.

When the doors to the dining room swung open, he faced his parents for the first time since Christmas day, the first Christmas day, the *other* Christmas day.

Just like before, his parents had already taken their seats, hors d'oeuvres already presented on the tabletop. And just as before, Narcissa rose, eyes catching on Draco's exposed Dark Mark. He'd somehow managed to forget, even though he'd rolled his sleeves himself not so long ago, that it had been left on display, another weapon in his arsenal.

He'd almost felt guilty about that, the first time he'd been here. Now, he enjoyed it, a vindictive part of him wanted her to see it, to feel some measure of guilt or shame or disgust.

Just like before, Lucius did not stand.

“Son,” he said. “Ministry Representative Granger.”

Hermione's fingertips dug into his arm for a beat before she released him, as if determined to stand on her own.

“Hello,” she said, a tiny waver in her words. “You may call me Hermione. The formality is hardly necessary.” She pivoted her gaze from Lucius to Narcissa. “Your dining room looks lovely.”

Narcissa smiled, not quite as forced. “Thank you. Please, sit.”

Already, Draco had difficulty keeping track of the things that happened exactly as they had before, and the things that had been altered. What had felt like a perfect memory of their evening sagged under the weight of thousands and thousands of little things that transpired in every second of every minute.

When Draco took his seat, he checked his grandfather's pocket watch; he'd already spent ten of his thirty minutes.

He wouldn't have time to sit through several courses of awkward, painful conversation, waiting for the moment when everything fell apart. He'd have to break it first, in order to fix it the way it needed to be fixed.

When Draco was seven, he and Theo had snuck out on their toy brooms in the Nott gardens. They'd flown way too far, way too fast, in pursuit of a real snitch they'd nicked from a set at Malfoy Manor. Draco had lost control of his broom trying to loop too quickly around a grand, three tiered fountain; he'd rolled, fallen, and landed on hard stone with his outstretched arm, losing the snitch and breaking his wrist in the process. The snitch had been from his father's set, one he'd been expressly forbidden from touching in the past. He hadn't wanted to disappoint his father, so he hid his wrist inside his robes when Narcissa picked him up later in the day.

He couldn't hide it indefinitely, though.

When his parents found out, naturally they'd called for a healer. Draco's wrist had to be rebroken before it could be set correctly. It had started healing improperly: a *malunion*, they'd called it. The healer gave him a dose of Skele-Gro, a sleeping potion, and by the next morning, his wrist was in perfect working order again.

This dinner didn't feel so different from that: rebreaking a bone that set incorrectly the first time around. A malunion. That's what this was, after all, wasn't it? A bad coming together.

He would need to cut straight to the point of this dinner.

He allowed for five minutes of pained pleasantries.

He sliced through a piece of Cornish Hen, speared a vegetable, took a bite, chewed and swallowed.

Then, he spoke.

"Mother, Father. Shall we skip ahead to the part where you explain why you've decided to insult us by forgoing the most basic social etiquette for receiving guests in your home?"

His voice came out so sharp, so level, so startlingly loud that it surprised even him as it rang through the room. Hermione's head snapped towards him: eyes wide, a deep vertical line between her brows.

"Did you expect Hermione not to notice and me not to say anything?" He directed the question straight at Lucius, barreling down the long table between them.

"Am I to take from this petulant outburst that the *basic social etiquette*

we have employed in allowing this woman to join us at our dinner table on a holiday is not sufficient for your childish wants?"

So very near to the first time. Some reactions were bound to the magic in one's veins, it seemed.

Narcissa cut in, just as she did before.

"It's not—personal, Miss Granger. Not as it has been in the past. But the matters of an Estate require certain considerations." She glanced at Draco, then at Lucius, before returning her focus to Hermione, who sat with a sort of grim determination on her face. "Draco carries two pureblood lineages in his veins, are you aware of that?"

Hermione squared her shoulders: a beautiful specimen in resistance. Draco had forgotten how powerful she could look. Even sitting at a too large dinner table occupied by four.

"Yes, Mrs. Malfoy. I am aware of Draco's past, and of the *considerations* of an Estate."

Words flew, zipping across the table; he'd forgotten how quickly things had devolved, trapped in his own horror.

"You are not ignorant, then?" Lucius demanded. "You realize what you will cost him: social status, a fortune, his family name? *Generations, centuries* of history and tradition? You know and you simply don't care? You wish to take my son from me? From his mother, his family?"

"That's why we're here, Mr. Malfoy. This doesn't have to be a zero sum game." Draco heard her deliberation in every carefully articulated syllable.

"And what, pray tell, does that mean?" Lucius snapped.

Hermione flushed, faltered as the words with which she took such care missed their mark entirely. This time, Draco knew what she'd meant.

"It's a theory about gains and losses," he said. "It means that Hermione believes I can still have a relationship with the two of you regardless of my relationship with her."

"*She* believes? And what of you, my *son*?"

"I believe you'll revoke access to my accounts should I continue my relationship with her. That you will use this family's money as leverage to get what you want, as you always have."

"Draco," Narcissa said, silver clattering against her plate. She looked at him as if she couldn't quite believe the accusations he'd just hurled.

Hermione looked at him, too. Her expression differed from Narcissa's disbelief. Hermione's look said she couldn't understand him, not in that moment. She had no idea that it had all been hopeless from the start.

"Draco," Hermione started, before Lucius cut her off with his fist slamming down on the table.

"Do you have any idea, *girl*, the price I've paid to preserve this family? I won't have you tearing it to pieces. In the war alone—"

Draco remembered this part, perhaps more keenly than the rest. Branded into his brain the same way a mark had been branded onto his skin. He savored getting to shout at his father over it one more time. He let himself feel the anger, feel the rage forged by the two months of misery he'd endured because of this pathetic fucking dinner conversation.

"The war? You treated me like cannon fodder, nearly got me *killed*—"

"Some things couldn't be helped—he would have killed us *all*."

The first time they'd had this fight, Draco remembered Lucius sounding vicious here, terrifying. Now, he seemed closer to unhinged, to desperate. Draco couldn't decide if he wanted to laugh or scream.

The second time, it happened like this:

He didn't believe his father. Even if it had been a sense of preservation, of wanting to keep all of them alive, that drove him to make the many and varied terrible and unforgivable decisions he'd made during the war, that didn't excuse his actions now. Not the way he treated Hermione. Not the way he treated Draco. He didn't believe that the potential loss of his only son mattered as much to him as his demeanor suggested.

For too long, sidestepping conflict with his father had included with it the comorbidity of maintaining a relationship with him, tenuous and

conditional as it was. Even Narcissa, who nearly broke Draco's heart every time he saw her trying, and failing, to force a middle ground where there was none, had limits he did not think she would overcome. Limits that would prevent her from accepting Hermione as a permanent part of his life. Draco could no longer avoid conflict with forced civility in the way Narcissa would have it. Poise and grace and conversation held exclusively through subtext only masked the beliefs she held to as tightly as Lucius did, excusing nothing.

Hermione *would* be a permanent part of his life.

He wouldn't let his father win this time, not again, not now.

"That's a weak excuse and you know it," Draco said, chest shaking as he exhaled. Adrenaline nearly burned him up. He'd hidden from the flames before, sinking into the cold reprieve his Occlumency offered. Now, he embraced the heat.

Draco had never seen his father's face flush so red, features so twisted in anger.

"Excuse me?"

"Hermione is my family. If you care so much about preserving and protecting this family, then you will find a way to accept her."

Lucius stood from his seat, palms pressed flat against the table as he leaned over his plate. Even now, with all his resolve, the steel in Lucius's gaze nearly forced Draco to balk, shrinking away from the source of that anger.

"This is not a *negotiation*," Lucius seethed, venom spit like a serpent.

Between Draco and his father, Narcissa and Hermione watched as if this dinner had become their worst nightmares, though perhaps for very different reasons.

"If you do not end your dalliance with this girl I *will* revoke access to your accounts. All of them. You'll live as a pauper—"

"Do it."

Lucius blinked. The dining room was big enough that if Draco had shouted, he imagined his words would have echoed, knocking on walls and windows as they mocked their recipient. But he hadn't shouted. He'd spoken evenly, in a normal speaking voice, the request

he'd waited the whole meal to make.

Lucius blinked again, evidently clearing his head of the fog Draco's demand had cast on him.

"You will have nothing," Lucius spat. "No money, no connections, no nice secret flat paid for by *this* Estate. I'll have you disinherited. What prospects do you imagine there are for a disinherited Malfoy with The Dark Lord's mark on his arm?"

"Lucius!" Narcissa's voice rang sharp and tight, practically shredding the tablecloth between them.

Draco shot from his chair, pulse pounding behind his ears. He'd never been consciously aware of baring his teeth before, but he could feel it in the painful grimace twisting and stretching his lips.

"It's your fucking fault I have it in the first place." He could nearly feel his mark burning, on display. He didn't know who'd weaponized it now. "Keep your money, keep every fucking knut."

He thought about smashing his plate or throwing his silver, something to exercise the wildfire thundering through his veins.

Instead, all the glass in the dining room shattered.

Goblets, chandeliers, windows: all of it.

The next instant, Hermione had her wand out, immobilizing the explosion. Had she sensed it? His impending loss of control?

Thousands—perhaps millions—of shards hung in the air between them, glittering almost like snow.

Hermione muttered a spell and the glass disintegrated, dust falling to the tabletop, contaminating their meal. When he looked at her, she had a tiny trickle of blood seeping through her right eyebrow.

His heart sank.

Whatever he might have done next got swallowed up by a blur, a spin, cotton in his ears and film over his eyes. A sensation not unlike a portkey, pulling him into alignment with his own body in the new version of a timeline he'd just made.

Draco blinked, blurred vision sharpening.

Back in his flat, standing in front of his fireplace again. He grabbed at his pockets; the time turner had vanished.

It wasn't the only thing.

He turned to find an empty space where a green tufted sofa once sat. Which meant Hermione had gotten to Eliot in this new version of events, too. His eyes caught on all the other empty spaces around him that once held her things: books missing from the bookcases, a throw blanket missing from the back of an armchair, her traveling cloak missing from the coat rack.

He released a breath, shoulders sinking, spine collapsing. He spun, nearly jumping out of skin at a sound from the kitchen.

Theo emerged, a tumbler of whisky in each of his hands. Draco whipped his head back around, confirming the time on the grandfather clock: just under five minutes until six.

"I thought I told you to *sit down*. I'm not letting you use it again right now. Sit. Drink." Theo forced a tumbler in Draco's hands.

He blinked, rubbed his temple, and tried to make sense of Theo's words.

"You—you know I've already used it?"

Theo landed in the black leather wingback beside the fireplace. He shook his head, drew a breath, and looked up at Draco with question. "Yes?" he said, voice lilting, turning what might have been a statement into a question. "Fifteen minutes ago—"

"No, just now."

"Wait—what?"

"I just used it. Five minutes to six."

"You mean fifteen minutes to six."

"No, five. Theo, I just got back. I—" Draco dragged a hand through his

hair. A strange burning sensation travelled beneath his skin from his temples to the nape of his neck. “I went to dinner; I didn’t let him win. I—I asked to be disinherited and then I blew up—fuck, it was an accident; I haven’t lost control of my magic since I was a child—”

“All the glassware. You blew up all the glass in the dining room.”

“Yes.” Draco didn’t have the wherewithal to be surprised by that confirmation, struggling to align an out-of-order series of events. Across from Theo, he sank into the second, matching wingback.

Theo dragged a hand down his face, returning to his brow line to rub his thumb and forefinger along it, pausing with fingers on both temples.

“You’ve just returned from having, I presume, changed the course of events from that Christmas dinner? Fuck, time is complicated.” Theo blew out a breath, dropping his hand from his face. “This—timeline, the one I’ve always known. That’s how the dinner always happened; you blew up all that glass after fighting with Lucius. I just watched you go back and try to propose to her before the dinner instead of planning to do it after. Which didn’t work, by the way.”

The burning at the nape of Draco’s neck travelled down his spine, blooming in a manner consistent with true, earth-shattering panic. The kind of hot fear he felt when he learned his father had been sent to Azkaban in fifth year, or when he first watched The Dark Lord set his snake on a body in his home.

“But why didn’t telling my father to keep his money fix it? She still—she left?” He put his glass to his lips and tilted his head back, downing his whisky and experiencing a different kind of burn.

Theo’s brows drew together. “She was overwhelmed, I think. Didn’t want you to blow up your life for her—something about having to be absolutely sure for something that huge. I—Draco I’m not exactly privy to the private conversations surrounding your breakup. I just know my best friend has been oscillating between furious and depressed. You kept going on about how if ever there was a reason the two of you should break up it was because you put her in harm’s way.”

“I did.”

Theo rolled his eyes as an annoyed scoff slipped from his throat. “Right. Sure. You’ve been doing a lot of that self-flagellating, too. Shit

about how you're a bad influence in her life, just like with Pansy. Which is bullshit, by the way. Finally talked you out of it a bit and now this whole *I have to propose to her so she knows how sure I am* thing. And—well. Here we are.”

Draco's pulse throbbed behind his eyes.

“Why didn't proposing work?” He felt a bit sick, regretting the alcohol he'd just dumped into his stomach. “She said no?”

“You didn't have enough time,” Theo said. “We haven't gotten much further than that. This literally just happened.”

“Thirty minutes wasn't enough time to convince her to marry me?”

Theo didn't say anything, features pinching as he blinked.

“Thirty minutes,” Theo repeated. Not exactly a question, more a confirmation.

Draco opened his mouth to say *yes, of course, thirty minutes*, but closed it again. His pulse throbbed behind his eyes again.

“I had you extend the time I could stay in the past. I needed more time to fix the dinner.”

Theo leaned over and set his glass on the hearth.

“Fuck—Draco. I know I'm good, but. I've already modified it to operate in years. I've modified it to operate outside a clean loop of time, to start *new timelines*. I've modified it to bring the user back to their starting point after five minutes. And now you're saying I extended that, too?”

Many times in Draco life, he'd felt like an event repeated, a conversation echoed, hovering along the thin line between coincidence and divination. He'd just experienced it in a literal sense, having travelled back in time. But this moment, this was different. This was a near perfect repetition of a conversation he'd already had with Theo, only out of order.

“That's exactly what I'm saying.”

Theo said nothing, just started shaking his head. He pulled the time turner from his pocket and started examining it. “Still just five,” he muttered, head swivelling from side to side.

“So, I tried to propose. And I feel like I have to assume that something about that...not going well, inspired me to fight with Lucius and ultimately still blow up the glass that I remember blowing up just now because *you* remember it, too.” He dropped his head against the back of his chair. The throb behind his eyes spread, filling out his sinuses. “Theo. If I was just in the dining room, before I left and I—disappeared. The other version of me that would have been left at that table, did he not know I’d already used the turner? I don’t—”

“Paradox avoidance, mate. Time would have continued normally for the version of you left behind. At least, I think. I assume. You would have remembered the events as if they happened normally, but not *your*—I don’t know—invasive mindset manipulating the motivations? You wouldn’t have remembered another version of *you* orchestrating things. The mind is powerful; has its own magic. I imagine something like déjà vu happens. You might have felt a bit off, or perhaps like time moved strangely, or conversations repeated. Those sorts of sensations, I suspect.”

“My brain hurts.”

“Best not think too hard about it. Time is a bit like magic, I think. There are parts we can understand and parts we can’t. And the way I’m combining time and magic in this thing?” He lifted the time turner from his lap. “Honestly, we’re asking for trouble. It’s a good thing we’re two responsible adults.”

“What? As opposed to children?”

“Can you imagine?”

“I’d rather not.”

Theo cleared his throat. Draco closed his eyes. The weight of realizing how much had changed and yet, how nothing had *really* changed, pressed against his chest, crushing him against the cushions.

“What now?” Theo asked.

A painful laugh choked Draco, caught between his chest and his throat.

“Proposing wasn’t a bad idea, honestly. I’ve had—so many opportunities, plans to do it over the past year and I”—a flash of an idea—“I know when.”

Draco opened his eyes, leaning forward in his chair as adrenaline surged, dulling some of the pounding in his skull and the exhaustion weighing down his bones. “I need you to modify it again. I need more time. Thirty minutes should still be plenty. I had a whole plan. Before my father was attacked last year. I—I let all those plans slip away while I was busy at the hospital, *choosing him*, again.”

“He was seriously injured.”

“He survived. And now we’re here.”

Theo tilted his head, an unreadable look aimed at the time turner sitting in his lap.

“How long did it take me to extend it to thirty minutes?”

“A little less than a month. Why?”

“How often do I get the opportunity to try and beat my own time inventing something? I’ll have it done in two weeks.”

Chapter End Notes

[Endless_musings](#), and [persephone_stone](#) are rock stars. that's it. that's the tweet.

thank you, thank you, thank you so much to everyone reading! and to everyone who commented and tumblr'd and discord-ed with me about the last chapter. seeing your thoughts and reactions has been such an amazing gift throughout this posting experience, and was especially rewarding for such a huge moment in the story like we had last chapter. SO THANK YOU! y'all are the best, seriously.

Chapter 39: +.083, 000, -.083

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

March

tick tock tick tock tick tock tick tock

Exactly six months after Lucius's attack, Draco prepared to return to that night and relive it with entirely different results. Not even Draco's most spiteful, furious impulses could relish the fact that his father would be in harm's way again. He couldn't seem to escape his eternal existence as a boy who wanted his father to live, to live in peace, and to live a life separate from him.

The same night Lucius was attacked, Draco had a portkey scheduled in the morning to whisk him and Hermione to Italy, a belated birthday celebration after missing their chance the month before because of James Potter's poorly-timed birth. Draco had planned to wine and dine her through the Italian countryside, to fuck her in the biggest, softest beds available in the most obscenely luxurious suites she would *hate* that he'd paid for, and propose marriage sometime between dinner and dessert. They'd celebrate with champagne and more sex.

It had been a good plan until fear for his father and concern for his mother had stolen it from him.

He knew Lucius would survive this time. And he knew what too much concern would look like months later. A creeping, tiny reintroduction of sympathy that grew from a seedling in his stomach to a newfound guilt he did not know how to uproot. Draco found he didn't so much care for that end result.

He didn't let Theo stay this time.

Theo apparated into Draco's flat two weeks to the day after his failed attempt at using the time turner to change the course of Christmas dinner. Or, he supposed, it couldn't *really* be termed a failed attempt; he achieved his primary goal by not letting Lucius walk all over him. He'd requested a disinheritance, which he'd since learned was already well underway, legally speaking. But he hadn't managed to

simultaneously salvage his relationship with Hermione. His life was still—unravelling. Ragged, fraying threads pulled loose and left to unwind, undone.

Theo delivered the time turner with slightly less apprehension than he had the first time. But marginally settled nerves didn't stop his constant reminders about fractional turns—reverse spin .500 to get to September 2004—which included writing it on a piece of parchment and using a sticking charm to affix it to Draco's bedpost as a final reminder.

At least half a spin seemed easier to accomplish than the .166 of one he'd had to do the first time, even with indicators engraved on the golden frame.

Now, Draco stood staring at the parchment stuck to his bedpost, mere minutes from laying down on his half of the bed, using the time turner, and finding Hermione's side no longer so distractingly empty. She would be there, in the bed with him. He couldn't decide if it made him pathetic or romantic, recognizing how hard his heart beat in anticipation of that eventuality.

When he'd received the owl from his mother in the middle of the night, Hermione cast a *tempus* that told them it was half two in the morning. He'd decided to give himself a ten minute window beforehand, genuinely uncertain how much time he'd spent coming out of sleep, gathering his wits about him, and finally making it to the window.

He glanced at his pocket watch: almost time. He set it on his nightstand, unable to justify why he might be sleeping with a watch in his pajama bottoms. He didn't dare risk even a single complication, nothing to confuse continuity. He barely had a grasp on it to begin with.

Draco sat on the edge of the bed, shucked off his shirt, and laid down.

He'd grown accustomed to the stress, to the pounding in his chest and the ticking pulse in this throat. No longer quite as intrusive, he almost felt numb: sensations so regular in their irregularity that they had become a sort of norm. He preferred the hollow sort of buzz behind his ribs to the infernal thumping. At least it provided him with a facsimile of calm.

He lifted the turner, ensured it was set to the current date, and unlocked it. Then, careful enough to pass Theo's methodical

standards, spun it exactly one half turn.

The dizzying sensation, the cotton, the blur: it felt different laying down. In some ways, more disorienting, a new angle to understand. Alternatively, the pillow beneath his head, the blankets covering his frame, the mattress beneath him: they offered a sense of stability.

When the traveling stopped, he noticed the darkness first. Without a lamp lit, the only light in his bedroom came from the moon's faint glow trickling in through the window. The same window where an owl would soon land.

He noticed the scent next. Just like last time, the stale sort of stagnation he'd grown accustomed to had transformed into something sweet, vaguely vanilla. He breathed deeply, preparing himself to find her next to him, and rolled to face her.

Gods, he'd forgotten how far her hair could travel. Especially with it kept longer. He nearly rolled onto an errant curl invading his side of the bed. She usually put it up when she slept, but if he remembered correctly, they'd stayed up late that night—this night—after they'd spent most of their evening with her reading and him brewing. They'd shared a bottle of wine, argued about something silly and academic, and fell into bed a little too tired and a little too tipsy to properly fuck, but tangled up together nevertheless.

When she only had the energy to brush her teeth before bed, her hair got free reign of their pillows.

As if pulled in by a summoning charm, he crossed the boundary from his half of the bed to hers. She lay on her side, back to him, a perfect position for him to steal a selfish moment of comfort, face buried in her hair, arm wrapped around her midsection. She settled against him in her sleep, adjusting to his presence in the sort of subconscious way one did when sharing a bed.

Draco closed his eyes. Breathed against her curls. Felt the numb fear inside his chest throb: an announcement and a reminder.

Too soon, there came a tapping, a gentle rapping, at his darkened window frame.

He didn't move at first, uncertain how quickly he should react. The first time he felt like he'd startled awake the moment he heard the noise.

The bird tapped on the glass again. This time, Hermione rolled in his arms, first to her back, then fully facing him. She opened bleary, sleep-addled eyes.

He thought she might say something, mouth dropping open, but her eyes closed again, not fully awake, as it were. The tapping came again and, this time, a tiny line formed between her brows.

Cold toes found his shins, pushing him towards the sound. She frowned with her eyes still closed. Draco smiled. Seized by muscle memory, he leaned forward and dropped a kiss against her forehead, wrangling curls over her shoulder and away from her face.

“I’ll get it, love.”

That seemed to rouse her more, coming to as he rose from the bed and opened the window, prepared to receive the bad news he already knew would come.

“What is it?” Hermione sounded curious, though not concerned, not as she had the last time when he’d leapt out of bed, heart beating wildly in his chest. She rolled out of bed slowly, a small stretch, that right elbow of hers cracking in the funny way it did if she leaned on the bed just right. She walked up behind him, hands wrapping around his torso. The striking intimacy of it all nearly buckled him at his knees, a feast to sate a starving man.

He let her cast a *lumos* for him again, reading the letter he’d memorized in his stress-ridden haze following this event the first time.

“My father,” Draco said. He forced a calmness in his voice, unconcerned. “He’s in the hospital.”

He felt her tense against his back, grip tightening before it loosened, *lumos* dropping away as she lowered her wand, stepping around him to get a better look at the letter.

“Is he—what does it say?”

“My mother is with him.”

“Let’s get dressed,” she said.

Last time, they did. Now:

“Wait.”

Hermione had already spun away, halfway through casting a *tempus*, her other hand on the dresser drawer.

“Wait? Why?”

“He’ll be fine. He doesn’t need me there.”

Her hand slipped from the drawer. Her wand eventually fell, too. Without her *lumos*, only the pale moon illuminated the room as it had when he’d first arrived. He couldn’t see much, but he saw her disappointment. He could recognize it anywhere, seared into his memory from the conversation they’d had nearly two months ago before, the last time he’d seen her at the end of January.

“Draco, he’s your father.”

He took a step towards her.

“I know. But my mother is with him and there’s nothing I can do.”

“You can go there. Be there for support.”

She reached out, taking the letter and casting more light so that she could read.

“I could, but I would just sit there and do nothing. We’re not—we’re hardly on excellent terms and—” he broke off. All his plans for how he wanted to say this had twisted around each other in his head, fragments and iterations and branching paths all fighting for attention as several different versions of how this conversation might have gone seemed to pop in and out of existence every second. “Hermione, he’s not the most important person in my life anymore. I have a surprise for you, in the morning. I don’t want to miss that.”

Her disappointment twitched in the space between her brows, fighting off what he hoped was affection, or warmth, or a rush of love. But when she met his gaze, her stare crushed his hopes of ever seeing Italy. She would think badly of him for abandoning his family in a time of crisis. He should have known, might have known if he’d stopped to think about it instead of barrelling forward, trapped in his own momentum, propelled by an overwhelming need to fix, fix, fix.

“It sounds serious,” she said, holding the letter between them. “Your mother will need you.”

“She’ll be okay without me.” A gulp of air, more panicked than he

would have liked. “I won’t be okay without you.”

“What? Draco, I’ll come with you. I’ll just wait outside.”

She turned back to the dresser, already pulling the drawer open and retrieving a shirt for him. When she held it out between them, Draco saw two options coalescing from the thousands of variants that might-have-could-have-should-have existed, neither of them what he wanted.

He could push: refuse to go to the hospital and in doing so, prove himself as someone too cold, too callous for Hermione to understand. If she agreed to go to Italy with him, he suspected there would be no successful proposal.

Or he could let her pull: go to the hospital and likely live the scene and the following events just as they transpired the first time around.

The reality that he’d just failed settled in the dark spaces in their bedroom. He couldn’t bear to disappoint her again, in a different way.

He reached for her, took the shirt, and tossed it onto the bed. Instead, he pulled her into a hug: a selfish last stand in the face of defeat.

“Just—give me a minute,” he said to her curls. All his hopes for an Italian adventure with her, expensive sheets, even more expensive wines, disintegrating. Little sparks of light, hope he’d clung to in this endeavor: he watched the darkness swallow them up, meals for failure.

He breathed, in and out. Tiny pinpricks erupted in waves beneath his skin: in anticipation, in relief, or in fear, he couldn’t tell. When the world blurred again, he held her tighter, preemptively mourning the future ahead for the version of himself he’d leave behind, standing with a woman in his arms and precious little time left to do so.

Draco breathed deeply, disoriented to find himself horizontal once again, back in his bed as one typically was in the middle of the night. Vanilla haunted him, memory of her scent still lingering. He might have imagined it, and if he had, he couldn’t bring himself to care.

He let his head sink deeper against his pillow, crushed by exhaustion above all else.

She wouldn’t be there; he knew she wouldn’t. He tortured himself

anyway, stretching his arm across the surface of the bed, crossing the boundary between his side to hers. Fingers flexed, palm skating across the sheets, finding coldness, emptiness.

Even knowing she wouldn't be there didn't stop the sharp sting behind his sinuses, the swelling high in the back of his throat. He swallowed, trying to force it down, force it away. Crying felt like confirmation; it felt like defeat, acceptance of a version of his life he had no intention of accepting.

He closed his hand into a fist, forcing himself to sleep.

What difference did it make to the nightmare if he greeted it waking or sleeping?

—

Waking with the sting of failure still lingering in his skull, Draco didn't move at first, oppressed once again by the overwhelming silence surrounding him. He allowed himself a moment more to wallow, but he'd already done months of it; a man could only survive so much of his own misery.

When he rose, he dressed quickly and—despite insisting to himself he wouldn't do it—immediately sought out the empty space where a tufted sofa once sat in his living room. Still missing from his life. He hovered between the kitchen and the living room. Hunger pulled him towards the kitchen, but the need to know what version of his life he'd woken in overrode the hollowed out sensation deep in his gut. He felt a bit dizzy looking at the Floo, and opted to apparate to Nott Manor instead.

He found Theo having a lounge, or perhaps a nap, or perhaps a whole night's worth of sleep, in the gardens. Draco sat on the edge of a fountain—the same fountain he'd failed to maneuver his broom around when he broke his wrist as a child—and kicked the heel of Theo's shoe.

Theo bolted awake, taking in his surroundings with wide, rapidly blinking eyes, before his panic dissipated upon spotting Draco.

"Explain," Draco said.

“I realize I’m normally quite in tune with your moods, but I do think I’ll need more to go on than that.”

“I’ve just used the time turner—for the second time. What reality am I in?”

Theo tilted his head to the side. Massaged his temple. Flopped back into a lying position.

“So—this is the sort of friendship we have now, is it? I’m your designated debriefer when you fuck with the fabric of the universe?”

“Who else would it be?” Draco snapped, stomach gurgling as he suppressed annoyance. Draco knew that his exhaustion and hunger and general sense of failure had nothing to do with Theo.

Theo stared at the sky above. Draco hadn’t even bothered to check the time after he woke, but if he had to guess, it looked somewhere around early afternoon, with the sun heavy and ascending in its path from one horizon to another.

“What an interesting series of events,” Theo mused. “I wonder if Blaise Saw any of this. He’d probably be livid we’ve fucked with time.”

“Yes, I suspect so.”

Theo released a beleaguered sort of sigh.

“What do you need to know?”

Draco hadn’t thought that far. Driven purely by the instinct to orient himself, he hadn’t considered many—or any—of the specifics required to achieve that.

“When Lucius was attacked last year—I went to the hospital, not Italy, right?”

Theo lifted himself up on his elbows, head cocked once again as he watched Draco.

“Hospital,” he said. “What did you—”

“Christmas dinner, last year. With my parents. Did I blow up the glassware?”

Theo’s brows lifted, deep horizontal lines carved into his forehead. He sounded less certain, or perhaps less confident in his understanding of

what Draco needed, when he answered.

“Yes.”

“And Hermione still left?”

A grimace.

“Yes.”

“And I came to you for the time turner?”

“In January.” Theo nodded as he spoke, fully sitting back up. “And then there was some weirdness last month. You went back to try and propose but came back after the dinner. We’re—we were, no, still are, I think—misaligned.”

Draco exhaled. Tension released some of its death grip on his spine. He remembered that, too.

“I modified the turner—gave it to you a few days ago.” An arched brow. “And now you’ve used it?”

On the tail end of his relief that nothing had changed from the version of events Draco knew, the implications of that fact sunk in. Nothing had changed, not the big things at least, despite the fact that he’d very intentionally tried to do just that. Even though he’d failed, shouldn’t *something* have shifted by virtue of his meddling? Wasn’t that the perennial cautionary tale tied up with time travel? Every breath, every step, every blink: they all bore far-reaching consequences one couldn’t possibly predict?

Draco dropped his head to his hands, gripping at his hair, scratching at his scalp.

“I don’t—” he started, staring at the pebbled ground beneath his feet. “What did any of it do? My head hurts.”

“Best not think too hard about it. Time is a bit like magic, I think. There are parts we can understand and parts we can’t. And the way I’m combining time and magic with the turner? Honestly, we’re asking for trouble. It’s a good thing we’re two responsible adults.”

Draco wanted to vomit. But he had nothing in his stomach but bile and regret.

“Stop,” he croaked, finding himself incapable of lifting his head.

“You’ve—said that before.” Which meant things hadn’t happened *exactly* as Draco remembered, but certainly close enough that the major events that brought him here all still converged on this very moment.

“Oh. You’re really in the thick of it, then, aren’t you?”

“You brought me the modified time turner a few days ago.” Not a question, just a repetition. There was a lot of that going around.

“Right.”

He looked up. “I was going to use it? To propose earlier?”

“I don’t think you’d decided exactly when. Kept going back and forth about the best time to do it; September or December.”

“December?”

“The shop opening.” Theo dragged a hand down his face, skewering Draco with a look that said he didn’t know *everything* about his life.

“It was a good night,” Draco said.

Theo made a retching noise. Perhaps the look had been meant to convey that perhaps he knew *too much*. They tended to tread back and forth over that particular line at random.

Draco rose, shaking out his limbs, shaking off his lingering hunger and frustration and the disquiet that perched so heavily on his shoulders.

“December,” he said again, trying to formulate another plan, another route he might take in search of the destination he sought. “December could work. September wasn’t right but—December maybe.” His skin buzzed, nerve endings zapping and humming with a kind of frantic energy that bordered too close to unhinged for comfort, but that he knew of no way to corral or control.

“Draco?” Theo asked.

Draco turned. He hadn’t even noticed he’d been staring into the fountain. Agitation shot to the surface of his skin, a kind of unreasonable annoyance he couldn’t place. He bit back a bark. “What?”

“Would she”—Theo shifted on his lounge chair—“would she want this?”

Agitation became guilt in the way it crashed, once ascending, now soundly battered into the ground. He fell back onto the fountain ledge again, stone serving as a rigid, uncomfortable seat. He sucked in a breath, distantly aware of his inability to tear his gaze from Theo's look of ever-increasing concern. He burned: his face, the back of his neck, the center of his chest. *Gods*, it ached.

He dropped his head in his hands again: lashed by guilt and shame and want and need and all the inextricable ways those things wound themselves together. Impossible to sort, even with all the time in the world, it seemed.

"I miss her so much." He spoke to the pebbles beneath his feet.

He heard Theo clear his throat.

"I know. But that's not what I asked."

Draco closed his eyes, too tired and drawn to muster the indignation required to fight Theo's inability to let him get away with a non-answer.

Holding Hermione for those few minutes, having her in his arms again, he almost wished he hadn't. It had resuscitated his hope, brought it back from the dead.

Theo spoke, granting Draco more time to think. "In the version of events you've lived, did I already ask you that? I've already asked it in mine."

Draco shifted the toe of his shoe, feeling the pebbles give way beneath it. He kept his eyes closed, head in his hands, one deep breath—or perhaps one scream—away from losing it.

"You've asked a variant of it, yes," he replied in the calmest tone he could manage. "I said I was doing it for me, too. So that Lucius didn't win again."

"That has nothing to do with Hermione."

"But it does."

"And what does letting Lucius win even *mean*, Draco?"

Pebbles crunched, and Draco imagined Theo must have risen. Several steps later, a shadow cooled the back of Draco's head.

“You wanted to propose to Hermione before Christmas dinner so he wouldn’t win—”

“Before that I had to change the dinner so he didn’t—”

“Too complicated,” Theo said, cutting him off. “I’m—trying to help.”

The shadow disappeared. When Draco looked up, he found Theo taking a seat next to him on the fountain. “Ignoring the fact that time travel is a fucking nightmare to wrap my head around, I don’t—understand what you’re trying to achieve. Because you’ve said it’s so Lucius doesn’t win but—what does that mean?”

“I don’t know.” It rushed from Draco, part declaration, part confession. “It’s—I don’t know. More of a feeling than anything else. Maybe it’s not even about winning. But—more that I always feel like I lose.”

Theo’s knee knocked the side of Draco’s leg, a silent show of solidarity.

Draco tried to make sense of the bog inside his brain that trapped all his thoughts and feelings about his father. Difficult terrain, and he often opted not to traverse for fear of getting lost, of sinking, of becoming trapped.

“You remember when we were little and you used to tell me how badly you wanted to go home, even when we were here, at your Estate?” Draco asked.

Theo’s bouncing stilled. He hummed a noise of acknowledgement.

“I think it’s like that. You wanted that *feeling* of a home, not the actual one.”

“Are you searching for a feeling of home or of winning?”

Draco fought back the inexplicable urge to sob.

“Both.”

“And is Hermione the answer to both?”

“Yes.”

“Should she be?”

Silence ate the seconds between Theo's question and Draco's complete inability to answer.

"I can't—not try," Draco finally said. "If I have a choice? I can't just —" he heaved a breath, worryingly close to crying in a lovely garden in the middle of the day, with his best friend present to bear witness. "If I know there's even the smallest chance I can fix it—any of it, all of it, even just some of it—I don't think I have the willpower not to."

His lungs *hurt*. His chest *hurt*. The ever growing lump in the back of his throat *hurt*.

"Theo," he said, sneaking broken words through a throat rapidly losing the ability to carry speech. "I've only done it twice but—I can see myself going mad. Trying to fix things, trying to control all the uncontrollable things that have—will have, haven't—happened to me. Or the things I've done." He hissed, wincing in pain as he realized he'd been dragging his nails against the stone fountain: catching one, ripping it, drawing blood. He watched red bead on the edge of his finger. "We never should have used it in the first place," he concluded, smearing his blood onto the stone.

"No. I don't think we should have."

"Then why did we?"

"Fun? We were stupid. What was I saying earlier about us being responsible adults now?"

"It wasn't *that* long ago."

This conversation felt more like banter, more familiar, more manageable. Some of the tension seizing Draco's core softened.

"Long enough that you blew up Lucius Malfoy's dining table over Christmas dinner. You'd have never done that then."

"And you?"

"Me? Well, I'm preaching temperance, aren't I? It's a sign of the end times, honestly."

A grotesque laugh bubbled up Draco's throat, a thin, worn out sound.

"Is it possible to oblivate one specific detail from over three years of someone's life?" Draco asked, grappling for the absurd since

everything else had failed him.

“I don’t deal in mind magic, only trinkets.” A telltale pause, the kind in which Draco could hear his heart beating. “*Although.*”

“Although what?”

Theo jumped to his feet, spinning on the pebbles as he animated as quickly as his thoughts likely ran.

“You have the time turner?”

Draco hesitated. He did. He’d pocketed it before he came over. His pause, evidently, had been answer enough.

“Give it to me.”

Draco almost didn’t. For a moment, he didn’t move.

“Draco, give it to me.”

“Right, yes. But—you’ll give it back? If I need it again?”

Theo’s frantic, excited energy faltered, a look of pity overtaking everything else. Draco resisted the intense urge to hit him.

“I’m going to make it so that neither of us needs or *wants* it again.”

Chapter End Notes

as always, eternal thanks to [Endless musings](#), and [persephone_stone](#) for their alpha/beta support. thank you for saving me from myself, time and time again.

and thank you so much to everyone who is reading! i appreciate your comments and your kudos and your conversation so, SO much. there are legit theses being written in the comments and honestly, some of y'all might know my version of these characters better than I do. it's utterly astounding. y'all are geniuses! bonus points if you caught the poe sample in this chapter ;)

Chapter 40: +.166, +.083, 000

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

April

tick tock tick tock tick tock tick tock

Theo never gave a timeline on what *making it so neither of them needed or wanted the time turner again* entailed, which left Draco in a strange sort of stasis, lingering in the in-between. He'd been left without a plan for the first time since January, stuck waiting for a nebulous *something*.

He finally dragged himself into the shop, brewing from the back room instead of constantly holing himself up in his flat. He brewed entire days away, producing enough stock to last months, experimenting, too. Anything to occupy his mind: pulling him out of his fixation on the past, living in his unfortunate present, accepting an uncertain future.

“Mr. Malfoy?”

He looked up, finding one of the shop clerks poking her head through the door. He'd barely exchanged a full sentence with the girl since hiring her at the beginning of the year.

“Yes?”

She tapped on the door, a nervous noise he could identify through the wood. She let out a ridiculous giggle before she spoke.

“Harry Potter— *the* Harry Potter. He's here. To speak to you.”

“Fuck.”

She choked on her giggle.

“I mean— *fuck*. Just”—he waved a stasis charm over his cauldrons —“send him back here if you don't mind. I'd rather not be murdered where customers can see.”

She giggled again, probably thinking it a joke. But Draco had difficulty imagining a scenario where Harry Potter came to speak to him and *didn't* have murderous intentions in mind, at least not after the last few months.

Seconds after the clerk disappeared, Harry Potter walked through the door in all his infuriatingly bespectacled glory.

“Malfoy.”

“Potter.”

“Shop doing well?”

“Oh, fuck off, Potter. Why are you here?”

Potter dragged a hand through his already-wild hair, mussing it further. “I don’t know, honestly. I’m supposed to be following a lead in Knockturn right now but—I saw the shop and...”

“Felt like dropping in on an old pal?” Draco arched a brow, crossing his arms. Whatever this was, he had no interest in a moral lambasting from the likes of Harry Potter.

Potter puffed out a breath, shaking his head. “I suppose that’s not far off. Maybe a bit of curiosity.”

“Curiosity? Come to witness what’s left of my life?”

“No—Merlin.” He lifted his hands. “Defensive much? Gods. She—she won’t really tell us anything. She’s been—”

“Stop, Potter. I swear if you tell me *she’s* been unhappy, I’ll curse you. I don’t care how many megalomaniacs you’ve saved us all from.”

“She has been.”

“What did I *just* say, Potter?” Draco relieved himself of his wand, letting it roll across his workbench. His fingers twitched, begging him to hex or jinx or curse the boy-who-wouldn’t-shut-his-fucking-mouth. “So what, are you here to make sure we’re even? That I’m as least as miserable as she is?”

Potter made an incredulous sort of sound, shoulders rising and falling in an exasperated motion.

“You know I’d just gotten used to the idea of you,” Potter said,

sounding a bit like an accusation. “I’d finally accepted I was probably going to be stuck with you. Hell, I almost even liked you well enough.”

“And now?” Because that set up certainly felt like it had a caveat lying in wait.

“I don’t know if I’m supposed to be mad at you for breaking her heart. You and I did have that talk once.”

“We *almost* had that talk. Furthermore—” he broke off. A righteous indignation flooded him, far too Gryffindor-ish for his liking. Nevertheless, the audacity of Potter’s suggestion that *he’d* been the one to break *her* heart astonished him. But as quickly as it flashed, hot magma bubbling inside his chest, it cooled and hardened. Draco blamed Hermione. He blamed himself, too. After all this time, with tiredness weighing him down, neither option seemed exactly right.

“We broke each other’s hearts, Potter. It’s no one’s fault.”

—

In the end, Draco didn’t hex Potter and Potter didn’t hex him. Draco barely resisted the insistent throb behind his ribs begging that he ask more about Hermione. It seemed like Potter barely resisted asking several questions of his own, mouth opening and closing soundlessly as he presumably tried to form a thought. Potter ultimately left with very little else being said, nothing of consequence at least.

Waiting for Theo to reappear had started driving Draco a bit mad. Every time he Floo’d or apparated to Nott Estate, Draco was met with a frantic series of *not yet*s and *soons* and *fuck offs* and *be patient, Dracos*. Lacking anything else to do, Draco spent most of his idle time reconsidering his choices over the last few months. Brewing had lost its efficacy in distracting him; he had no choice but to face the things he’d done.

He came upon his first conclusion in the days following Potter’s surprise visit.

Draco didn’t want the point of his life—and the thing he regretted the most—to be that he should have cut his parents out sooner. The more

he thought about the last several months, and the several years before that, that inevitability seemed more and more like the only logical conclusion one could draw.

And that—well, that was just *sad*. And it felt like failure. But perhaps this was a situation that could be neither won nor lost, only weathered.

Where was one meant to draw the line, amputate the limb, staunch the bleeding? He couldn't separate his want to fix things with Hermione from his want to figure out a solution to his complicated relationship with his parents. He was never supposed to hang all his happiness on her. That was what she wanted, what she'd told him. But what if that was incidental? What if the thing he needed for himself, to excise the toxic pieces of his family, had the unintended but very welcome side effect of returning Hermione to his life?

Days later, after combing through that thinking with a methodical precision even Hermione Granger would have found impressive, he came to the conclusion that he was a horrible fucking person.

He sank into a kitchen chair, quest to brew a pot of tea abandoned. He closed his eyes, chest collapsing, shoulders sinking.

Regardless of his motives, or his wants, or his needs, or how he logicked his way around guilt and responsibility and shame for his choices, it all boiled down to one simple fact, one Theo had been trying to help him see for months:

Draco was an egotistical bastard.

Who the fuck did he think he was? Acting as if he had the right, the fucking *right* to change anything? He made his choices once. He should have had to live with them.

He'd debated how he would tell Blaise that he couldn't stomach coming into work, disgusted with himself and the choices he'd tried to take away from Hermione by fucking with time. He felt vile, embarrassed that it took him so long to see it, revolted by the decisions he'd already made. Decisions that set into motion an entire series of events that may or may not have ever even happened without his interference. He wanted to do little else than sit at his kitchen table while considering when and if and how it would ever be possible to repent. He came to one single conclusion each and every time.

Then Theo walked through the Floo.

“I made a modification,” he announced, pulling the time turner from his pocket almost as soon as he spotted Draco.

Draco’s laugh came out hollow, tired. “Did you now? Does more, does it? The several modifications you already made weren’t enough?”

“You’re in a mood, I see.”

“Existential crisis, I’m allowed.”

Theo rolled his eyes.

“I need you to be impressed.” He swung the turner with an almost careless ease between them. “If not for the fact that this thing is several sentences in Azkaban sort of illegal, I’d say I deserve an Order of Merlin in magical innovation. But, all things considered.” Theo shrugged.

“What did you do?”

“I added a memory charm.”

Draco sat forward in his chair, staggered for a moment by an echo of this very scene. Had Theo found him in his kitchen like this once before? Or did it only *feel* familiar?

“You added a memory charm—to a time turner?”

Theo nodded, a perfectly vertical motion at first, then skewing towards the diagonal as if fighting off the urge to shake to the negative.

“To be honest, it’s a hack job. I only worked on it for a month. I pulled it together as best I can but if we use it—and I’d have to use it, too—we won’t remember using it at all. But we’ll still get the new timeline, and the new version of ourselves will be blissfully unaware. Solves your problem, right? Use it, try to fix things, and if it doesn’t work, well, at least you’re freed from wondering, yeah?”

Draco’s brain cut straight to the end result of such an absurd, absolutely ridiculous thing. “And when we land back here, time turner in hand? You don’t think we’d use it again anyway? Should we write ourselves a suspicious note that says, ‘please don’t use this time turner you don’t remember having?’” Draco swallowed against a deluge of *what ifs* drowning him.

“Can I have a little bit of credit? I’m capable of thinking through more than one problem at a time. I charmed it. A sort of self delivering portkey—they are my specialty, after all. It’ll go straight back to the drawer in my father’s study where I found it years ago. I won’t even know it’s there, beauty of a memory charm.”

“And if you find it again?”

Theo laughed, smile stretching across his face as if he’d been waiting to put all Draco’s potential challenges to rest with his superior problem solving skills.

“I never intended on doing anything with it the first time I found it. I didn’t start messing with it until your father asked me if it was possible. In a different version of events—when Lucius asks me if I know anything about time turners in 2001 I imagine I’ll just say no—because I won’t have it yet...or anymore, I suppose.”

“And us? You don’t think we’ll notice something—strange?”

“Kind of counting on paradox avoidance for that one.”

“Are they even paradoxes if we’re starting entirely new timelines?”

“Oh, for the love of— *complication avoidance*, then. Sure. We might be confused. Or maybe we won’t because *complication avoidance* magic will do it’s thing. My point is, this all hinges on whether or not we use it for something very specific.”

Draco sighed. Not for the first time in his life, he couldn’t decide if he felt impressed or concerned that he and Theo had somehow found their way to the exact same conclusion in very different ways.

“I know,” Draco said. “I’ve been thinking a lot about the last few years. About—how I got here. About my choices.” He cleared his throat, forcing himself to continue, to confess to his crimes, out loud, at least once. “I regret being so arrogant as to think I had the right to change time in order to fix the things I regret—to take away Hermione’s choices in the present, more so.”

Theo’s wild excitement cooled. He nodded, taking the seat across from Draco.

“But I also regret so much with Lucius. And I’ve been thinking about big things this whole time and how—well, I’m not sure they’re the important bits. Maybe it’s the little things. Tiny bits of momentum,

you know? Small moments with him that”—he struggled for the right word—“ingratiated me, just enough, just a bit more than I might have been otherwise. When I came home from Sarajevo I was hopeful we could have a normal relationship, did I ever tell you that? I thought a little time apart might have made things easier.”

Theo shook his head, time turner resting in his lap, hands limp.

“He dropped a betrothal in my lap. I think that was when I first realized I would have to cut him out. I would have done it then, I *wanted* to, I just didn’t have the—ability, not yet. And once I’d worked up the courage, I’d lost some of my resolve. I’ve been using the time turner to try and fix my mistakes with my parents and with Hermione which is so—Theo, I think I’m a terrible person.” He had to suck in a breath, control his lungs, swallow down the rising pressure in the back of his throat. “The only thing I should have ever used it for—and even then, I can’t keep straight which decisions I should *have* to live with—” he cut himself off, another gulp of air. He could feel himself spiralling, sinking into a paradoxical pit that hid its escape routes in impossible questions and unknowable answers. He steadied himself. “I think I know what you want to use it for, and I agree. We should go back and make it so we never used it at all.”

Theo didn’t speak for several seconds, eyes fixed on the time turner in his lap.

“That’s far back, much farther than a few months,” he said. Perhaps he needed convincing, too.

“It is. And that terrifies me. What if I never end up working with Hermione? What if I—what if we never—she never? What if I lose ever having had a relationship with her at all?”

“Or what if,” Theo started, slipping into an antagonistic tone, the one he used to argue a point to death, which usually meant his victory. “Maybe the future or the past or the way things happen isn’t all enormous changes with huge branching paths based on whether or not we got bit by a mosquito on the elbow in one timeline or on the knee in another. Maybe we’re sturdier than that, built on foundations that take longer than five or thirty minutes worth of time to unsettle. I don’t know if I want to believe that one single moment can entirely change who I am.” Theo offered him a generous look, thinned lips forced into a hopeful smile. “Or who you end up with.”

“But things—they cascade, Theo. That’s how time works.”

Theo narrowed his eyes, leaning forward in his chair, lifting his hands onto the tabletop. His fingers drummed against the wood before he launched into another rebuttal.

“Okay, things cascade, but from where? How do we know the starting point? From the top of a mountain or the bottom of a hill? Different levels of scale, I’d say. Wouldn’t you say your relationship with Lucius had already gone significantly downhill?”

Theo wagged a brow and despite the brain-melting severity of their conversation, Draco couldn’t help but groan over the—frankly, inappropriately timed—play on words.

“Think about it,” Theo said, voice tipping towards excitement again as he scooted to the edge of his seat, practically slipping out of it altogether. “I know I’m not smart enough to think through all the possibilities, but, I feel like it’s safe to say that if Lucius never invited you to be in that room when he received Hermione after we used the turner the first time, *something* about your relationship would look different than it does now.”

“Something good or something bad? We can’t know.” Despite that terrifying conclusion, Draco laughed silently, a kind of shaking in his chest and stomach that ached in his muscles. He could hope that maybe he’d pull away from Lucius sooner, even blow up all that glassware on his own, too—an organic explosion. But he could never know, not with certainty. There would be risk involved, significant risk he would have to accept.

“Would you risk it, Theo? Everything that’s ever really mattered to you? To fix a mistake? To give yourself the opportunity to do things the way they should have happened years ago?”

Theo answered immediately, and honestly, and in the only way Draco really expected.

“I don’t know.”

Oddly, that was enough.

Draco and Theo stepped through the Floo and into Malfoy Manor shortly after breakfast on the day they would use the time turner to go back in time and— *not* use the time turner. Draco had no intentions of announcing their arrival to anyone in the household. He *had* requested a disinheritance, after all. He presumed that removed unannounced visits from the list of acceptable liberties he could take.

His intentions flew out the nearest window upon finding Topsy working in the parlor.

The elf blinked up at them, a single moment of confusion in her enormous eyes, before joy overtook her.

“Master Draco,” she squeaked, sinking into a curtsy. “How is Topsy of service to the young master today?”

Theo interjected before Draco had the chance to implore that she not alert his parents of his arrival. Theo bowed: theatrically, ridiculously, and as he always did.

“Topsy, a pleasure to see you as always. Mopsy has wished you a pleasant Vernal Equinox. My apologies for the late delivery.”

Topsy’s ears flushed a deep maroon as she grabbed at them, twisting the droopy ends in her embarrassment.

“Shall I send Mopsy your regards the next time I see her?” he asked. Draco didn’t know if he wanted to laugh or not. They’d allotted fifteen minutes to prepare, lest they miss their opportunity and have to wait another month for the correct day and time to come around again, and Theo had chosen to spend some of that precious time conducting a terribly serious conversation about house elf well-wish correspondence.

Topsy nodded in a vibrating sort of way, either assent or an inability to control the overwhelming buzz from Theo’s attention.

“Excellent,” Theo said with a deep breath, shifting to a grin. “And what is it you’re up to today, Topsy? This is quite a lot of measuring tape.”

Quite a lot barely scratched the surface. Measuring tapes floated in various stages of activity all about the room.

“Remodeling, Master Theo.” She glanced at Draco. “Replacing furniture.”

Several of the measuring tapes hovered where the green tufted sofa used to sit. Even at the manor, Draco couldn't escape its absence.

"Well, Topsy. It's lovely work you're doing but Draco and I have some business to attend to and we'd prefer if that Master and Mistress of the house are not informed of our arrival. Could you be so kind as to take a thirty minute respite? Perhaps take a stroll through the gardens at your leisure." When that particular suggestion seemed to spark panic in Topsy's eyes, Theo pivoted. "Or perhaps iron some linens."

Topsy smiled. "Of course Master Theo." She disappeared with a *crack*, taking the assortment of measuring tapes with her.

Theo turned, an enormous grin splitting his face.

"I realize we have several other priorities to consider and—well, *fuck* we won't remember this, will we?—but you know what just happened, don't you?"

Draco massaged his temple, long past trying to follow Theo's logic.

"And what just happened, Theo?"

"A Malfoy elf just took orders from me. I've finally done it—charmed my way around elf magic"—he made a grand sweeping wave with his hand as if to announce the requisite flourish such a statement required—"and soon we won't remember it."

Draco shrugged. "Maybe we will. I'm not convinced you have any idea how paradox—sorry, *complication*—avoidance even works."

"Oh, I most certainly don't," Theo agreed, pulling open the parlor door.

Draco followed, stopping just beyond the threshold, silent as Theo closed the doors again.

The surface of his skin hummed, prickling and crawling and buzzing with an uncomfortable energy that somehow managed to run hot and cold at the same time. An unusual feeling: off-kilter, perhaps foreboding, if he allowed himself to think in such terms. He'd tried not to think too hard about the finality, the irreversibility, of volunteering his mind to be altered, of going back so far that he would shift whole years' worth of his life.

If he thought too long or too hard about it, he nearly talked himself

out of it every time. His brain would stick on images of Hermione smiling up at him with pride or lust or love, preemptively mourning a possible version of his life where he would never know—or know to miss—the way those things altered the gravity governing his bones. In those moments, he felt like he could float, soar, fly without the aid of a broomstick. He couldn't imagine, and certainly did not want to imagine, what his life without those feelings would look like.

Instead, he focused on the path that using the time turner had put him on: an invitation into a room where once there had been a dismissal. A persistent spark somewhere inside his chest that perhaps, maybe, he could earn his father's pride again. Somehow. Some way. And later, a spiral wherein he knew, and couldn't ignore, the ability to change the things he regretted. Having the option haunted him. It nagged at Theo, too.

Beyond those things, he chose not to speculate. Trying to control the consequences of his actions had been a spectacular failure the first two times he tried. He'd finally learned to accept his limits when he saw them.

He only hoped that at some point he had-has-will have a ring in his valet box.

Draco jumped when Theo clapped a hand on his shoulder.

"You ready?" Theo asked, question communicated more by eye contact than by words.

Draco pulled out his pocket watch, checked it, and nodded. Theo blew out a breath and held the time turner between them, looping the gold chain over Draco's head and then his own.

"Reverse spin, 3.166." Almost a question.

"Yes, Theo. We've both quadruple-checked it, at least."

Theo nodded, exhaling another shaky breath, and unlocked the turner from its resting position.

"And you have the date set, right?" Draco asked in a surge of last minute panic. It took a significant amount of willpower not to reach for it, to let Theo have control.

Theo nodded.

As he placed his thumb and forefinger on the hourglass, the Floo rushed to life on the other side of the doors behind them. Muffled footsteps sounded, then the doors swung open, putting Draco face to face with Hermione—the Hermione who existed in the present with him—for the first time in months.

She staggered back, eyes wide and brows drawn in an instant collision of confusion and surprise. Her mouth dropped open as her gaze darted to three distinct points in rapid succession, over and over. From Draco to Theo to the time turner between them.

How could they have forgotten? For all his worry and his planning, it somehow slipped his notice that if they intended to travel to a time shortly after Hermione arrived at work in the past, she would also be present *in* the present.

“What is that?” she asked, entirely unnecessarily. She already knew. Draco knew that she knew from the tone in her voice and his knowledge of her past. She’d spent a year with a time turner around her neck; she knew exactly what she looked at.

A dormant beast roared to life in Draco’s chest, clawing at his ribs, tearing flesh and organ and muscle to shreds, demanding to be released, to reach for her.

It hurt.

It ached.

It burned.

Draco battered it back, accepting her presence for the gift that it was: one last chance to see her.

“We fucked up,” he said simply. “I’m sorry.”

He glanced at Theo, who nodded his understanding.

He flipped the hourglass: once, twice, three times, carefully aligning the last fractional turns to account for the two individual months they needed to travel beyond the three years.

Theo could have repeated the destination to himself a million times and it wouldn’t have mattered, not when Hermione stepped forward, protest prepared on those lovely, impulsive, beautifully brave Gryffindor lips of hers. Her movement startled Draco, who inched

away out of instinct, jostling Theo and ruining the precision required to select the correct month.

From beyond the blur and the cotton and the film, Draco heard Theo curse as the rest of the world fell away, leaving everything else behind.

—

When the time turner magic released them, a sensation Draco had grown disturbingly familiar with over the last few months, he and Theo stood exactly where they had been moments before. But *when* they stood seemed less certain.

Draco blinked, whirling to face Theo.

“When?”

Theo’s face had gone pale, mouth opening and closing as he fought to articulate an answer. He pulled the gold chain over his head, leaving the time turner hanging solely around Draco’s neck.

“An extra month, I think,” he finally said, hands coming to rest at the back of his head, elbows wide as he sucked in a deep breath.

“Forward or backward?” Draco’s stomach churned as he asked.

Theo had taken a half step away, breath heavy. “What?”

“*Forward or backward*, Theo. Is this January or March of 2002?”

Theo’s hands dropped to his sides.

“Backwards. I rotated too far. January. I think.”

“You think? *Fuck*— Topsy.”

Crack.

“Master Draco, you is returning from your meeting so soon. How is Topsy of service?”

Draco tried to force every ounce of his rapidly draining composure

into his words.

“Just popped back for a moment. Topsy, could you remind me of something. It is January, yes?”

Topsy’s head, already too big for her body, swiveled at a hugely comical angle as confusion registered in her posture.

“Yes, Master Draco.”

“And you said I’m meant to be at a meeting right now?”

“With your future Mistress, yes.”

“Thank you, Topsy. You are dismissed.”

With another quirk of her head, Topsy vanished.

“I’m with Astoria right now. I must be meeting her for the first—okay. I will have just gotten back from Sarajevo yesterday, I’m visiting you tomorrow. Where are you on this day?”

Theo’s foot and fingers seemed to be in competition over which could tap faster as he stared at the parlor door. His head rocked slowly from side to side, a precursor to shaking it. They didn’t have time to panic or to freeze or to wonder what to do. They had to figure *something* out if they only had one shot at this before Theo’s complicated time and memory magic erased any future plans from their forebrains. Despite Draco’s own pulse pounding in the back of his throat and the cavernous pit of anxiety gnawing at his stomach, if Draco had learned anything in the years he’d spent with Hermione Granger, it was how to remain relatively calm in stressful situations: be they blood curses, insidious guest rooms, or doomed holiday dinners.

“Theo—we only have thirty minutes. I need you with me. Where were you the day before I visited?”

Theo broke eye contact with the wood panels he’d been boring holes into with his stare.

“At my estate, probably tinkering with the—” he broke off, eyes widening. “The time turner, at Nott Manor. It was my downtime project when I got tired of trying to break into the vault.”

Draco’s head throbbed as he tried to wrap his mind around their options, if they even had any. “If we can’t actually stop ourselves from

using it in—next month—what can we—” He ran a hand through his hair, trying to channel what might otherwise devolve into a debilitating sort of panic.

“We didn’t account for Granger. How could we not account for Granger? It’s not like she’s stopped working—”

“I personally try very hard not to think about her these days,” Draco snapped. “What do we do?”

“We’re in the wrong time, Draco. I don’t know. I’m going to ask you to use the turner *next* month. I’ll tell you about it *tomorrow*. There’s nothing we can do *today*.”

Draco paced. He had to do something. His shoes clacked on the tile. He counted his footsteps, halfway down the corridor and back again. When he returned to his place in front of Theo, a stroke of an idea, a reckless, stupid idea, hit him.

“Let’s break it.”

“The time turner?” His eyes landed on where it rested against Draco’s chest.

“The one the other you is working on. If it was broken enough, would you stop trying to tinker with it?”

Theo made several disbelieving noises in the back of his throat, only partial vocalizations.

“I don’t know. I don’t—I don’t think so. I worked on the vault for *five years*. I’m good at fixating.”

“Can’t say it’s my favorite quality of yours at the moment.” A pause, a breath, a swell of annoyance cresting with a new idea. “We break it and we hide it”—yes, that could work—“you know more ward theory now, well— *you* you, the 2005 *you*— than you did in 2002. Hide it in the same place our version will portkey off to when we go back, ward it so *you* can’t get into it and—”

“—Hope I don’t fixate on trying to break into that instead of my family vault?”

“You already have a couple years sunk into the vault, don’t you think you’d want to finish that first?”

A pause. “Yes, probably. And I suppose paradox avoidance will converge on us in 2005.”

“Then what?”

Theo shrugged. “I really don’t know.”

“Do you have any better ideas?” Draco pulled his watch from his pocket. They were running out of time to make a decision, to *do* something.

Theo shook his head again, an unhinged sort of bobble, before he reached out and hooked Draco’s arm. He turned sharply, and without preamble, apparated them away.

When the wringing pressure of apparation abated, lungs decompressing, Draco had half a mind to shout at Theo for the lack of warning. But all things considered, he could hardly fault the expediency.

“I’ll be working in the east wing. I had a workspace set up there before I turned the vault into one,” Theo said, already marching out into the corridor. He threw the rest of his words over his shoulders, clearly expecting Draco to follow. “I’m counting on paradox avoidance to—take care of the other me, I suppose.”

“It did when Lucius invited me into the Floo parlor the first time. I should have been in there waiting.” Draco jogged to catch up with Theo’s deep strides.

Theo’s partially debilitating brand of panic seemed to have fully relinquished its grip on him, leaving it its place a determination that propelled him through the halls of his Estate. He didn’t so much as pause when he reached the door to a random room in the east hall. Theo simply pushed it open and released a shaking breath.

“Ok,” he said. “I’m not in here. I mean, I probably was. And I am now. But paradox—”

“—it’s all very confusing, I know. Where’s the turner?” Draco cut in, unwilling to waste any more time or words on twists and turns and possibilities they couldn’t possibly understand.

Theo approached a large workbench, rifling through the box sitting atop, the drawers beneath, the cabinets adjacent.

"I was just working on it. I know I was. I wanted to show you. I worked on it all week before you got back," he said, voice increasing in pitch as he turned out drawer after drawer, visiting every cabinet and shelf in the room.

Draco ran his fingers down the chain still dangling around his own neck, finding the hourglass sitting against his chest. Their version of the turner, still intact.

Draco looked at his watch again. They had less than five minutes remaining. And instead of experiencing panic, something strangely serene settled in Draco's chest, a hint to the idea he hadn't even fully thought yet.

"Theo," he said.

Theo kept rifling, tossing papers and trinkets to the ground, fully turning out the room.

"Theo," he said again. "It's not here."

"It has to be."

"It's not here just like you're not here, the other you, that is."

Theo's head snapped up from where he'd half bent himself over a crate of keys. "Paradox avoidance?"

"Probably." Draco lifted their version of the time turner up. "If it was in here with you, we probably triggered it for the time turner as well. It's—I don't know, equally as entangled in all this, right?"

"What do we do, then?" His head tilted. " *Is there anything to do?*"

"We were going to break it and hide it. I can't think of any better place to hide it than inside a paradox, jumbled up in time. If we have the only version now then it won't exist until it brings us back to 2005, and at that point we won't remember using it."

Theo barked out a single laugh, collected himself, then released the deluge, laughter spilling over.

"Poor future-past-indeterminable-time me. Probably constantly curious what happened to that time turner I was fiddling with."

"Let's hope it never turns up," Draco said, looking at the gold device resting so innocently in his palm.

“All this effort and we didn’t even *do* anything.” Theo’s laughter had taken on a sharp, violent sort of quality. Less enjoyment, more condemnation.

Draco sank onto an upturned crate in the corner of the room.

“That’s probably fitting. Since it’s what should have happened all along.”

“Does it count as having learned a lesson if we won’t remember learning it?” Theo asked.

Draco felt a sudden urge to close his eyes and sleep. To seek rest and refuge from years and months and moments he’d lived and regretted and tried and failed to change. It wore one down, in the end.

“I don’t know,” he said, leaning his head against the wall, letting his eyes close. “I just hope that whatever timeline comes from this, I gave Lucius a little less. Took a little more. That a different version of me makes better choices.” A sting rose in the back of his throat. “And I still hope to have what I had with Hermione. Even if it has an end.”

“I suppose if we’re confessing.” Theo paused, frowning. “My family vault wasn’t empty, not exactly—”

The blurring grip of time magic, when it came this time, sent panic shooting through Draco’s chest. He heaved several breaths, facing an unknown future—and an unknown version of himself who would not remember any of these moments that came before—with fear and regret humming in his veins. But still, he faced it, refusing to let the fear consume him.

Chapter End Notes

so much love to [Endless_musings](#), and [persephone_stone](#) for all their support an expertise!

y'all. thank you so much for reading! just...thank you! i can't believe how close we're getting to the end, so thank you, thank you, thank you for going on this journey with me! after fridays chapter we will move into daily chapters starting on Sunday, 12/20!

Chapter 41: 000, 000, 000

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

This time, the last time, it happened like this:

A return from abroad. Hope for eased tensions between father and son. A chance to discover what life looked like on the other side of a war, of a mastery, of prison sentences and house arrests. Instead: a marriage contract. A future laid out in ink on parchment, in signatures.

“Do I have a choice?” he’d asked.

He did not.

A taste of defiance, but not nearly enough. Not yet.

An argument observed from the other side of closed parlor doors. The first time he heard her go toe to toe with his father, posturing with words and wands. A scolding for his eavesdropping, withstanding the sneers of disappointment. Later, an owl. A new responsibility supervising her. Something of a last resort, a compromise. Soon, gravity collapsing around his heart every time he saw the scar she wore with too much pride.

A descent into Occlumency. An attempt to know his betrothed. An avoidance of the scar that reminded him of the history he preferred to forget, buried beneath shards of impossible emotion. And also, caramel apple ice cream. An attempt at understanding. Perhaps, a beginning.

A moment. Witness to bravery he did not know could exist, not in that form, in that place. He watched her stand exactly where it happened. Owning it. Controlling it. Overcoming it.

“What was that?” he’d asked, needing to know.

A victory. Hers.

Followed by an idea. His.

A touch. His hands on her skin, healing her of the harm his home caused. The first touch of many, and only the first time he planned to heal her. A different touch, too. Of meeting minds, of understanding. Families that did not always understand or appreciate: a middle ground.

A statement. Just one.

“I rode a dragon.”

And floodgates spilling open, only to be forced closed by a brutal dose of Occlumency. But such magic could only freeze the flood where it had already flowed. Reminders of something else, something more, held in stasis beneath the surface, waiting for the right warmth to melt.

A failed experiment, proof in painful lines streaking his chest. Worn beneath his shirt as he tried and failed to connect with his mother, to connect with his betrothed, to ignore a connection with *her*. A Cold War, but warming. Inexplicably, warming.

An accident. Not a date, not exactly. But a watershed nonetheless, frozen places thawing. Constellations hidden in freckles, flickering candlelight illuminating more than the table.

“You’re left handed,” she’d said.

And he’d never felt more seen.

A friend, she’d called him. An invitation, she’d given him. Crumbling self control wound up with Occlumency under the streetlamps in

Diagon Alley. Later, a fight with his father over his attempt at independence. Another taste of defiance.

A hand on his chest, painting a line between then and now, before and after. He'd nearly broken, given in. Instead, a delayed moment of defiance finally came to fruition. A broken betrothal and a future cracked wide open. The gap between his wants and his father's wishes widening.

A realization of his shift in circumstances. No longer betrothed. No longer promised. A realization, too, of a shared before and after.

"Hermione," she'd said. And permission to use her name felt like a new beginning. Not the first, but one of many.

A gift. Given on a sofa, received with tears. More than a gift: a choice, and the thing he'd spent the better part of a year obsessing over. It earned him a kiss. It earned him a date. But more than that, it earned him her trust.

A year, already gone. And then:

A kiss at a wedding. Not their wedding, not yet, but still perfect. In a garden, under the moonlight, as romantic as one could imagine, and so earned after so long. An undoing, he'd called it: a prophecy from an unintentional prophet.

A dark room, menacing magic engulfing the quiet as they held each other. Growing familiarity, growing intimacy. Growing. Fullstop. A shared goal, too.

"I could teach you, if you wanted to learn."

And she did, eventually.

A date. A kiss. More. Closer. A haze, feet from an apparition point. An appetizer against a sofa, an entree in his bed. He tasted her, held her, fucked her. Memorized as much of her skin as time allowed. And when he kissed her goodbye, so late it could reasonably be called early, he felt something warm and luscious yawn wide inside his chest.

A bet over a book. A different beginning. A countdown, now, to TS Eliot. To a time when the sofa would change hands, homes. A bargain sealed with a kiss. The magic would come later.

An anniversary of the worst kind: of war, of loss, of things survived, but not by all. He'd misunderstood what they were, assuming instead of speaking. And she'd misunderstood what they weren't, sheltering out of fear. They fell apart before they came back together.

A birthday, not his, held the answer. Over a month of abysmal communication to finally say some of what needed to be said. And when he'd said his piece, and she'd said hers, realizing he loved her soothed so much of his hurt. It solidified his resolve, too.

A confession.

"A muggle," he'd said. The moment he knew he'd really changed, that pretending had become reality, a nightmare into a dream. It didn't help him cast a Patronus, but it helped her understand him a bit more. Inching closer, ever closer, back into equilibrium as they learned each other again, or perhaps, for the first time.

A mishap during a heat wave. Delicious, sweat-slicked sex. The aftermath, accidentally interrupted by an unsuspecting friend. Hilarious, humiliating, and everything in between.

A sentiment. Sentimental, she'd called him. A birthday back where it accidentally began more than a year before. An intentional date this time. An ever-growing resolve to put her fears to bed. Another confrontation with his father, over betrothals, yet again.

A Hallowe'en party at Harry Potter's house. Something that should have been his worst nightmare. And yet, he'd enjoyed himself far too much. Watching as she socialized, daring to do some of his own. He ended the evening with her in his lap, lips lingering too close together as they whispered promises that this could be *real*; it could be *more*; they could *be*.

A Patronus, finally.

"What did you think about?" she'd asked. *Her*. And his friends. And the pieces of his life that needn't be perfect to be happy. They could be cobbled together into something resembling a happiness, just like his Patronus.

An introduction on a doorstep, with his tongue in her mouth and a hot desire coursing through his veins. She'd said she loved him, and it nearly undid him. Undoing, indeed. A Christmas lovely enough that he could almost forget the fight with his parents and the uncertain consequences of announcing her as an inextricable part of his life.

Another year gone in the blink of an eye. And then:

A breakfast. A feast. An intentional avoidance of anything involving *her*. But she'd moved in with him, and in more ways than one: his home, his heart, his head. And no amount of denial from his parents could erase that fact from the fabric of his reality. His father talked about business in lieu of anything else. He might have cared if he'd ever been allowed any part of it.

A new life, announced in the presence of friends he still felt out of place with. But he saw the joy on her face, the love in the room, the first inklings of what longevity could look like with her. He drank tepid tea and watched, wondering if one day that might be them.

A lesson in learning to fight. Learning how to find middle ground. Learning that some things were more important, more precious, than one's anger or disappointment.

"We're kind of stuck together," she'd suggested. She'd never been more astonishingly accurate in her remarkable life.

A son comforting his mother, recognizing a role reversal with stinging, painful clarity. This was how it felt to become his own person. Not just a son, but a man with a life and priorities of his own that did not always align with those his parents had for him. He loved his mother. But if he had to choose, and he feared he would, he loved *her* more. Admitting such a thing to himself felt like the worst sort of betrayal.

A proposal, in a sense. An accidental sort. On the heels of insecurity and growing pains and learning how to live together, in learning who contributed what and how much. He needed her to know how much he cared, how much he loved her, even if he fumbled his execution.

A final straw with his parents, relationship already so strained. Their attempt at dining for his birthday ended in insults and anger.

"Disgraceful," his father had called it, called *her*.

Disgrace by virtue of her existence, a sentiment he could not tolerate. He left them at the table, spending his birthday elsewhere.

A ring, pulled from an ancestral vault and given to no one. Not the right time, not yet, not *now*. Her fear of ruining his already crumbling relationship with his parents paralyzed their forward momentum. If she needed time, he could give it to her.

A birth that changed everything. A shift in perspective, seeing her with a child. Not theirs, not yet. But suddenly he could see a *one day*, wanted for such a thing. How could two become three? How could it be that simple?

An attack. Unexpected, unwanted fear wound around his spine; a desperate need for his father to survive, to be alright. But that need existed separately from any wants—or lack thereof—to see more of him. He sat in a hospital room, head in his hands, experiencing an unusual guilt over his worry.

A dinner, their first since the attack, since wishing for his father's survival and struggling to reconcile that sympathy with his distaste for everything else about him. Disinheritance not directly spoken into existence, but implied. But he'd been preparing for such an eventuality, should it find him.

An infuriating optimism. A request he was willing to entertain, for her, despite his misgivings. Despite the sinking sensation inside his chest screaming what a terrible idea trying to force civility with his parents would be. And yet, an agreement.

"We can manage that," his mother had said. And he almost believed it.

A Christmas. A disinheritance. A disaster. A defiance, but too late. He should have known. He had known. But he'd hoped, too. And he'd harmed her, shed her blood with shards of glass. She had nightmares the next few nights, broken screams about shattering chandeliers. It gutted him with guilt. Glassware might have literally exploded at that dinner table, but his relationship did, too. It just took longer, and hurt much more.

Another year; they went so fast. And then:

A breakup. She couldn't bear being responsible for his family falling apart, infuriatingly obstinate even when he insisted *she* was his only family that mattered. She insisted he had to be sure, but didn't believe him when he said he was. He could have put up more of a fight, but for as much as it hurt, he had things he couldn't bear, too. He couldn't bear that she might never be safe from the stigma of his family name, that she would be forced to carry his burdens, that he might be the cause of her nightmares. He didn't want that for her.

Ultimately, he picked her and she picked him, but somehow, they couldn't pick each other.

It broke his heart.

She won the sofa, too.

A disinheritance he insisted on, even without her. A legal and magical distraction: meetings and owls and so many signatures his head spun. But he began the long process because he'd meant it. For himself as much as for her. If he distracted himself long enough, spent enough time reading every bit of information on magical disinheritances he could find, he hoped he could forget how much he missed her.

A regression. Time kept passing and he kept missing her, failing to understand how they'd given up on something so wonderful, so easily. He'd had a ring in his valet box. He'd wanted to marry her, have a family with her, live a life with her. But he wanted that life to be one where she'd be free of his family's influence, of their hate, of their infectious qualities.

"You can't spend all day in your bed," his friends had said.

A potions shop that became his refuge, brewing and brewing and brewing to try and forget. It got him out of his bed, out of his flat, out of constant owls back and forth about accounts he no longer had access to, money he could no longer spend. Part of him wondered: at what point would she believe him, believe that he meant it? The accounts? His flat? The wards? The family magic?

An eviction at the end of the month. His flat finally taken away. A last minute move into his friend's Estate, drifting between homes, states of beings. He thought he might miss her less, the more time that passed. But instead, he missed her more: an ache in realizing that perhaps those years had been his best, difficult as they had been at times. He wouldn't have changed them for anything. And he didn't. He'd never even had the choice.

In the end, they were made of tougher stuff than five or thirty minutes might unravel. There were moments that changed. But most persisted, stubbornly bound to something called fate, or destiny, or prophecy. Or perhaps: hope.

Chapter End Notes

y'all. this chapter literally could not exist without [Endless_musings](#), and [persephone_stone](#) who helped me work through my search for the right solution and reassured me that it worked. they are truly the best!

thank you ever so much to everyone reading! for those who've had lingering questions about theo after last chapter, might I humbly recommend checking out sight and seeing, his pov story set during the same time frame as w&h. it should give you some insight!

i know this one was shorter, but it was necessary. never fear, though! because starting SUNDAY i will be posting a chapter a day until the finale on 12/26.

thank you, thank you, thank you for going on this adventure with me!

Chapter 42: +.083, +.083, +.083

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

June

“I put my furniture in your ballroom.”

Draco watched Theo process that statement: a blink of confusion, a crest of comprehension, and finally, a shrug of acceptance.

“Bit petty of them, don’t you think? Kick you out of the flat but make you keep all the furniture?”

“I’ve sullied it, evidently.”

“Real estate, though...” Theo trailed off, shrugging again.

“I won’t intrude for long,” Draco said. “I’ll find a new flat as soon as I’ve figured out”—a pause—“what I can afford.”

“Was it difficult not to grimace there? I know I struggled.”

“You’re the most unsupportive best friend imaginable, you realize that right?”

“It’s part of my charm.”

Draco fought back a sigh, tried to hold the anxiety and the grief at bay. He owed Theo a tremendous debt for taking him in, not that Draco would have expected anything else. But in demanding a disinheritance, in losing Hermione, in having his accounts closed and his flat reclaimed, Draco felt a certain lack of agency in his own life. He had a ballroom’s worth of furniture and a fledgling potions shop to his name, nothing more.

Theo’s smile wavered, and Draco realized he’d let the facade slip, the one that pretended he might be handling things alright, that his life didn’t feel like the shambles it was.

“You’re staying as long as you want,” Theo said, tone on the cusp of an order. He seemed to reconsider his words. “Actually, you’ll stay as

long as *I* think you should. You're untrustworthy right now"—he wagged a finger in Draco's general direction—"with all this moping and enormous, life-changing stuff. I'm taking custody of you for an indeterminable amount of time."

"Am I a hostage?"

"More like my adopted son, I think."

"I might prefer to be a hostage."

Theo grinned, slapping a hand on Draco's shoulder and giving him a rough shake as he tried steering them in a different direction.

"I was heading to my room," Draco said, sidestepping Theo.

"To do what?"

Lay on a chaise and stare at the ceiling.

"Unwind. Moving is tiring."

"So, let's have a drink, play some cards. Gobstones maybe."

Theo arched a brow, a challenge in his posture from the way he'd crossed his arms.

Draco took a step backwards.

"Maybe later. I'm tired."

"I'll let you beat me in wizard's chess."

"Theo," Draco said, realizing too late that his voice came out sharper than he'd wanted it to, cutting through the first syllable in Theo's name. "I don't mean to be ungrateful but—I've been faking it all day. I'd like to stop."

Draco doubted he'd ever be willing to express that much honesty with anyone else in his life. Hermione, of course, at one time. But now—only Theo.

Theo's smile fell. He gave a single, curt nod. "I'll send Mopsy when it's time to eat." Not quite phrased as a question, not quite phrased as a statement.

"Of course." Draco pivoted, shoes clacking on ancient Nott granite,

echoing in a slightly different tone than Malfoy marble. Halfway down the corridor, Draco paused. He pinched the bridge of his nose, ran a hand down his face, dragging at features that wanted nothing more than to pinch and distort and find relief in acknowledging the sting in the back of his throat, the pit in his stomach.

He turned, finding Theo still standing in exactly the same place, watching.

Draco might have said something else, but his thoughts ran dry, a well without water, intentions without words. How did one tell his best friend how much he appreciated him? For giving Draco a place to live? Space when he needed it? A push when he needed *that* more? And at the same time, how did one tell that same best friend that none of it was enough? That it felt like no amount of kindness could fill the hole in his chest, remnants of a crater from an impact he thought he'd already survived.

Most days he was just so tired. He went to work; he went to sleep. He tried not to think about Hermione, about having no money, no home, nothing of his own besides a bunch of furniture in a ballroom.

He only had his friends. And that wasn't enough.

Which made him feel that much worse, an ungrateful friend on top of all the rest.

Draco still hadn't said anything, eyes on Theo where he stood halfway down the corridor. Draco forced his fingers to relax, loose and calm.

He nodded to Theo, swallowing over the lump in the back of his throat.

Theo nodded back.

For whatever it was worth; that was that.

—

The embellished, coffered ceiling in Draco's bedroom at Nott Estate had three hundred and sixty four corners. Each tile contained five circular designs. If he counted, which he did, he would find four

hundred and fifty five circles above him. The largest circle in each panel contained a flower design, so ninety of those plus the two half tiles that comprised the inset for the door.

The wainscoting on the walls had one hundred and twenty two corners that Draco could count from where he liked to lay on the chaise beneath the east window. If he lay on the bed he could count two hundred and seventy two corners.

If he counted all the corners on the ceilings and the walls, all the circles, and all the flowers, he could disappear inside his own head for just long enough to forget how fucking miserable he was. That escape usually lasted about how long it took for Theo to come knocking at his door, suggesting a drink or a game or an outing with a most painfully forced positivity.

All things considered, idly counting to occupy the time Draco didn't spend working felt like progress.

He'd barely left his bed for most of February, tending only to his disinheritance, motivated by spite and sadness.

He'd barely left his flat for most of March, tending only to the shop, motivated by guilt that he'd abandoned Blaise and their new venture.

He'd barely figured out how to pretend in April, tending to his image, motivated by his friends' deep concern. He'd been desperate to never have to answer the question *How are you doing?* ever again.

He'd blinked and three months had passed. He'd last seen Hermione at the end of January. And suddenly: May and moneyless. And by the end of the month: homeless, too.

Now June, still unmoored but better at pretending.

He heard a knock at his door. He ignored it.

He began counting corners again.

—

As it turned out, only Teddy Lupin could pull Draco from his routine constantly working, counting, avoiding, and sleeping.

Draco received an owl from his Aunt Andromeda on the first of the month. Teddy wanted to see his *cool cousin*, apparently. What other option did Draco have but to reply immediately with *Yes, of course, please come for lunch at Nott Manor at your earliest convenience*. He'd responded on impulse, stunned at first that someone other than Blaise or Theo wanted anything to do with him. Even more so, stunned that little Teddy Lupin remembered him, wanted to see him, cared enough to ask.

Draco couldn't deny his jittery anticipation as he waited beside the Floo for their arrival. He liked Teddy, always had. Faced with an opportunity to see him again, Draco was reminded of James Potter, a child who would have now more than doubled in age since Draco last saw him.

The idea that James Potter, whom Draco had met on the day of his birth, had now lived more than half his life without Draco in it, felt strange, struck oddly. Draco had no rights, no claim to Harry and Ginny Potter's child. Hermione was his godmother; Draco only knew him by circumstance. And yet, a certain something ached inside his chest, realizing he'd forgotten to miss James in all the time he'd spent missing Hermione and his old life.

The Floo flared, green flames roaring and twisting. Seconds later, his aunt and cousin stepped out.

Draco's plans of a proper greeting to the Nott Estate fizzled away with his confusion at finding himself in a sudden and moderately aggressive hug.

Teddy Lupin had grown at least half a head since Draco saw him last. Bright blue, shoulder-length hair shortened and lightened into a perfect mirror image of Draco's white blonde coif.

"That's a convenient trick," Draco said. "My hair takes much more work than that to manage."

Andromeda stepped forward, offering him a hug of her own. Draco tensed, unfamiliar with such an easy, casual embrace.

"Mine as well," she said. She tucked an errant lock of hair behind his ear, a strikingly maternal action. Draco felt his smile slip, strained at the edges as he forced it to remain in place.

He turned his attention to Teddy, announcing the presence of toy brooms and lunch awaiting them in the gardens. Draco got the distinct

impression that if Teddy had any clue how to get to the gardens from the Floo parlor, he would have taken off at high speed and left his boring grandmother and cool—but not cooler than broomsticks—cousin in the dust.

Draco led his guests to the gardens, laughing each time Teddy's little feet caught on Draco's heels, following too closely in his excitement.

"Patience isn't your virtue, is it?"

He missed a step, realizing he should elaborate, but Teddy blew past him as the garden doors came into view. Draco paused on the threshold with Andromeda.

"There's no chance for lunch before we fly, is there?"

Andromeda laughed, light but forceful, and nothing like the socialite tittering Narcissa used so often. Draco drew a deep breath, gaze caught on the laugh lines at the corners of Andromeda's eyes, and resolved to stop comparing them.

He'd requested a disinheritance. He'd cut his parents from his life. He'd only torture himself by comparing Andromeda with the mother he hadn't seen in several months.

She shook her head. "You'll be lucky if you eat within the hour."

It ultimately took much more than that to wear Teddy out, reminding Draco far too keenly that he'd done little physical activity over the last several months and that over an hour spent on a broom required more stamina than he presently had. By the time he sat down at the lovely garden tables filled with food by Mopsy and Milly, he'd worked up an embarrassing sweat.

Teddy inhaled two sandwiches at an impressive and slightly alarming pace before throwing himself on his broom again. Exhausted and starving, Draco opted out.

He would have forced himself back on a broom had he known what Andromeda intended for him.

She set her teacup down, eyes following Teddy's path on his toy broom. "I lied to you," she said.

Draco looked at her. She wore no contrition, didn't even break her gaze from where it tracked Teddy.

“About?”

“I wanted to see you, not Teddy.” She finally glanced at Draco. “Although he was delighted we received an invitation to see his cousin.”

Draco didn’t know what to do with his expression, suddenly too aware of every muscle around his mouth, his eyes, his cheeks. Every position, every shift, felt forced and disingenuous. Andromeda took pity on him, saving him from having to formulate some kind of question or response.

“I heard from Harry that you and Hermione Granger had a falling out.”

Draco almost snorted at the understatement, could almost see the humor in how poorly the phrase *falling out* described what had happened. But as it stood, he felt a sharp sting shoot through his chest at the naked reality such a statement ultimately exposed.

“I also learned from Harry that you are in the process of being disinherited.”

Draco cleared his throat as cold pinpricks erupted beneath his skin in a wave rolling from his head to his toes. What could one say to something like that? To the truth, terrible and real? “It’s a longer process than I anticipated,” he said, finding his focus had slipped from her face, seeking Teddy on his broom in the background.

“Between the legal and the magical components, yes. It is a lot.” Andromeda’s voice took on a strained quality, not quite as carefully composed as Draco had grown accustomed to. “I was surprised I hadn’t heard from you. You and I discussed this once, at Harry’s wedding.”

Draco didn’t know if he ought to feel embarrassed. He couldn’t quite tell if she sounded offended, or sad, or some strange combination of the two. “We barely broached theoreticals.”

“And yet here we are.”

“It—honestly didn’t occur to me to reach out to you, I apologize. I’ve had”—he struggled for the right word, if one existed—“quite a bit on my mind.”

“You’ve been removed from your family vaults?”

Draco nodded. "Property, too. Hence—" He gestured vaguely around them, acknowledgement that they met at Nott Manor and nowhere he could call his own.

"Wards and blood magic?"

Draco shook his head. "None of the family magic, yet. We're still arbitrating over some lingering financials. I'm"—he clenched his jaw, forced the words through anyway—"I'm insisting on paying it back. What I spent from my inheritance. I don't want any of it. And now they've refused to take back the furniture I was using."

"Is that so bad?"

"They're being petty."

"You're not?" She lifted a brow.

"They cost me everything."

Andromeda sat back in her chair, back flush with the intricate wrought iron vines spiraling in a pattern. She drummed her fingers against the tabletop and Draco could feel the vibrations in his wrist.

He moved his hand to his lap.

Nearly twenty-five years old and he felt strangely childish.

"They cost you Hermione?" Andromeda asked after what felt like several eons had passed between them.

Draco hadn't asked for this. He made no requests for a relative he barely knew, not apart from the several social gatherings they attended together, to offer unsolicited advice and understanding of his circumstances. He didn't care that she'd been disinherited herself, that she knew more and better than anyone what it entailed.

He didn't want sympathy.

And he certainly didn't want to talk about Hermione.

He forced his head to move: left to right and back again. A shake towards dissent.

"They're only at fault for Hermione having left insofar as they made *me*, and I made many mistakes."

“I heard you blew up some glassware.”

“Story got around, did it?”

“I’m not trying to be unkind. Or to prod at fresh wounds.”

Draco bit his tongue. It felt like she intended to do *exactly* that.

“What are you trying to do, then?”

She sighed, and even though he didn’t want to make the comparison: it sounded exactly like his mother.

“I merely wanted to remind you that you still have family. Family who understands.” Her eyes darted to Teddy as he flew a circle around the fountain in the center of the gardens, the same one Draco broke his wrist maneuvering around so many years ago. “Family who cares about you,” she concluded.

“That’s very kind and I appreciate the sentiment.” He knew he sounded stiff, stale, unfeeling even as he said it.

She lifted a brow. “But?”

“I don’t know.” And he didn’t. Truly. The entire conversation with Andromeda felt misplaced, poorly timed. The ache inside his chest still felt too raw to consider what healing might look like, what a future family might entail in the absence of the one he’d planned on having with Hermione.

“Well, when you do”—she smiled, watching Teddy as he flew, then shifting her gaze to Draco once again—“we’re here. And we understand.”

Draco tried not to grimace, tried not to cringe, tried to think of anything other than his desire to return to his rooms and count the tiles in his ceiling or brew enough stock to last the shop a few solid years of business.

“Thank you, Aunt Andromeda,” he said. He tried to mean it.

“Theo says you’re working yourself to death.”

Draco coughed: poor evidence to the contrary. “Theo is dramatic.”

Blaise stood at the doorway between the front of their shop and the back room where Draco brewed. He wasn’t entirely certain of the time, but judging from the dim light illuminating Blaise from behind, the streetlights had turned on. That, of course, meant the sun had set. And *that*, of course, meant that Draco had been brewing for at least twelve hours.

“Have you eaten today?”

Draco pointed to the bin by the door. Blaise leaned, peering inside.

“Am I to surmise from this that you’ve had”—a pause—“six chocolate frogs?”

Draco didn’t answer. He added eight drops of salamander blood to his cauldron, stirred anti-clockwise six times, let the solution rest, and began his clockwise stirs. He jolted when his potion vanished. He looked up, finding Blaise directly across from him, vanishing the other potions Draco had been working on that day, too.

“What the fuck, Blaise—”

“—We have enough backstock to last us several months. I’ll pay for the lost ingredients out of my own salary. *You*, however, need to sit and *we* need to talk.”

Fury fought with exhaustion, battling beneath Draco’s skin. Before one could behead the other and claim its victory, Blaise preempted him by speaking again.

“You’ve been here all day. Theo said you were working with customers all afternoon while also brewing. Are you ever planning on going home or must I make use of *levicorpus*?”

“You mean Theo’s home?”

“It’s your home right now, too. Don’t be difficult.”

Draco might have fought more, pushed back harder, if his head hadn’t hurt quite so much: sinuses throbbing, bones aching. He coughed again, lungs tacky and clogged and awful.

“Are you sick?” Blaise asked.

He certainly didn't want to be. Sickness meant bedrest. Bedrest meant *time*. Time to think, time to wallow. Draco was self-aware enough to know that's what he'd be doing if forced not to work. It was what he did in the scant spare time he had, anyway.

"No. I'm fine."

Blaise didn't seem to believe him.

And rightfully so.

By the next morning, after brewing late into the night despite Blaise's best efforts to coax him away from the shop, Draco could barely roll out of his bed. His body ached. Coughing felt like it tore his lungs from his chest, and his head felt fit to burst from the pressure behind his eyes.

He'd buried himself beneath his covers, wishing for a swift and early death, when Theo burst into his room.

"Happy Birth— *Oh*."

"Please go away."

"Blaise did say you didn't look great yesterday but..."

"Theo, just"—a cough tore from his chest, hacking phlegm from his lungs and ripping his throat to shreds—"go."

For a moment, the world spun at the wrong angle, a slide in his vision.

He didn't have the energy to be kind. To care. A year ago, he'd woken to the most beautiful birthday gift; a scantily clad witch in his bed. Now, he had mucus and irritation and no hope of the birthday toffees he loved so much.

"I'll—have Mopsy bring you some tea, something to eat. Is it your stomach or—"

"Theo—I don't want any help." Irritation burned the agony and hopelessness from his veins, it helped in a strange, spiteful way. "Just leave me alone."

Theo's face twisted, his own flash of annoyance, then a frown. "I'll tell Blaise you won't be into work, then."

"Great."

A hollow laugh. "You mean thanks."

When he left, Draco searched himself for regret, for something resembling contrition for how he'd just treated his friend. Instead, he found aches and pains and a severe disinterest in doing anything other than closing his eyes and keeping them shut for as long as possible.

Mopsy tried bringing him food; he told her to take it away.

Theo brought a bright orange potion; Draco refused to take it.

Milly brought tea; he made her vanish it.

Draco knew time had passed from the angle and shape of the shadows beside his bed. First they lengthened, stretching wide, before tilting, shrinking, and pulling back towards the window. He only opened his eyes every so often, after a particular violent cough or when an ache from lying so still for so long demanded that he shift. He opened his eyes once: day. Again: night.

He presumed at some point in the darkness that it must have stopped being his birthday. He only realized after the fact that he'd been holding out hope, tiny and smothered by illness as it might have been, that a Malfoy owl might deliver him his birthday toffees.

He'd demanded a clean break, and this is how it looked. No more malunions.

He spent the next day in bed, too. He felt dizzy and weak and only accepted water from Milly when Theo threatened to portkey him to a healer if he didn't cooperate.

Mostly, Draco slept. Asleep, he had a chance for dreams wrapped in memories of a life when he had Hermione in it. Sure, he might find nightmares there, too. But waking only offered the one option: the nightmare his reality had become. So he took his chances and slept.

The coughing persisted, migrating from something damp and throaty to somewhere deeper in his chest, heaving against his ribs.

"Please see a healer," Theo asked, sometime towards the end of Draco's second day in bed. "Or at least take the potion. It will manage your symptoms. You *know* that. You brewed it."

Draco ignored him.

Later: “Theo told me to tell you that you have to see a healer. He’s set an appointment.” Blaise didn’t bother sounding hopeful.

“Cancel it,” Draco told him. He assumed Blaise did just that.

The next day, the hallucinations started.

When he opened his eyes, disappointed to find light in his room and a painful ache in his chest, he saw an impossible sight.

Pansy Parkinson stood at the foot of his bed, arms crossed, fringe perfectly straight, and a look of utter disdain drawn in the shape of her mouth and angle of her brows.

“You’re unforgivably dramatic, even after all this time. Has anyone told you, lately?” Hallucination Pansy sounded just like real Pansy: perfectly mean and exactly as expected.

“Not recently, no.”

She made a disgusted noise, eyes rolling, arms falling, breath gusting.

“Fucking Theo and Blaise. I should have known I couldn’t leave you three alone—otherwise I get owls about how you’ve gone all *despondent* and they’re *worried* and evidently you’re *heartbroken*. Merlin’s fucking—” She yanked his blankets down, sending a stinging jinx at his ankles.

Draco didn’t recall hallucinations having that particular ability.

“Pans?” he asked, swallowing back a cough, choking him as he lifted himself onto his elbows.

“Don’t look at me like that,” she snapped, wand leveled at him from where she still stood at the foot of his bed.

Exhaustion pulled his head back to his pillow, elbows and arms giving out beneath him.

“Like what?” he asked, blindly throwing his arm out to the side in search of his wand on the bedside table. He needed to summon his blankets back and he knew he couldn’t count on Pansy, hallucination or not, to return them.

“Like you missed me”—he hissed as another stinging jinx hit him, his shin this time—“you didn’t owl me a single time.”

“You didn’t want me to.”

“That’s not the *point*. You didn’t even try.”

“If I say I’m sorry and I really mean it, can I have my covers back?”

“Draco Malfoy, you are sick and you won’t let anyone help take care of you. So, no, you may not have your covers back, you dramatic fuck.”

He’d tried to stifle the coughing, but it reached a tipping point in the back of his throat, seizing whole muscle groups, sending him sputtering and heaving.

“That’s disgusting,” she said from the foot of his bed. But when he looked up at her, coughing controlled, the hard lines on her face had neutralized, as close to sympathy as he could probably expect.

Draco closed his eyes, body aching and exhausted.

“Why are you here, Pansy?”

“I had lunch with Hermione Granger this afternoon.”

Draco shot straight up, gag reflex choking him, cough propelled from his chest. He folded in half, head over his knees, as he coughed into the mattress. It occurred to him that perhaps he ought to feel self conscious over the fact that he wore his pajama bottoms and nothing more. But it wasn’t as if Pansy hadn’t seen it all before, even if it had been nearly a decade now.

He closed his eyes, resting his head against his left knee as the coughing subsided. He looked up again at the sound of footsteps—determined clicking heels to be precise—next to him.

Pansy held out a glass of water.

“Drink it.” The *you utter fuck* at the end was implied, but he heard it nevertheless. She stepped away again, taking a seat on the settee at the foot of the bed. “As I was saying,” she continued. “I, Pansy Parkinson, had lunch today with the ineffable Hermione Granger, war heroine, recipient of an Order of Merlin, first class, and apparently, ex-lover to one Draco Malfoy.”

He felt a little sick. A different kind of sick. A stomach-churning sick, a heart-aching sick.

"I know what you're thinking. *However did I manage that?* Well, I'll tell you. Theo chaperoned, even though the two of them don't seem to be on great terms right now, either. I'm still not entirely certain what he's up to. There's a lot of meddling going on, that much is obvious."

Pansy pointed her wand at his glass and refilled it with a casual *aguamenti*, leveling him with a pointed stare that told him to continue drinking.

"But here's what I do know," she said, leaning against the footboard. "I've been back from France for more than half a year and you haven't reached out once. I'm pretty upset about that because I know Theo told you I was back. But I didn't owl you, either, so that's my own fucking fault. I'm willing to call it even on us both being awful to each other because we have something more important to discuss."

She paused and Draco realized he was meant to agree with her. So he did. And despite the general sense of dizziness, the weight in his bones, and the constant searing sensation in his chest, Draco smiled.

"I *have* missed you, Pans."

She scowled.

"We'll have a hug about it when you're not all"—a vague gesture towards him—"grotesque and infectious." She tossed him his blankets. He covered himself again, laid back, sank into his pillows. Prepared himself for whatever attack Pansy had in store for him.

"I don't know much about Hermione Granger. But I'll tell you this, Draco: she doesn't look great. You look worse, obviously." He felt a light tug at the blankets. "What are you two doing to each other?"

Draco took a slow, deep breath, pulling air in carefully so as to not irritate his raw, aching throat. "I don't know."

Pansy made a growling noise, as if preemptively displeased with what she planned to say. "You love her?"

"I had a ring. Before I had to return it." A pause, a sigh. "Disinheritance, and all."

"Fuck."

Draco pressed his palms to his eyes, pressure against his sockets as he tried to ignore the headache stampeding through his skull.

He felt another small tug at the blankets, then came Pansy's voice from a new angle.

"When I fix this for you, I expect an important role in the wedding."

Draco didn't mean to laugh. It shouldn't have been funny. But Pansy's completely unwarranted confidence struck him sideways. Ridiculous, impossible. And if he wasn't careful, several laughs away from a sob.

But as it stood, he coughed instead. He refused water this time, declined her assistance, terse as it was. He couldn't encourage her any more. He coughed and coughed and coughed until his stomach hurt as much as his chest and he couldn't even hear his door opening and closing as Pansy left.

—

Two days later, and he still hadn't left his bed. His stomach ached and grumbled, simultaneously starving and repulsed by the idea of food. He'd only cough so much he'd throw it all up. Theo had tried to force a cough suppressant potion down his throat twice the day before.

Draco had since warded his doors and refused to let Theo or the elves in. Not that it would do any good if Theo really wanted to enter. Nor would it stop elf magic. But it felt symbolic enough, representative of his wishes they would need to knowingly break if they intended to try and force care upon him.

He didn't want to feel better.

Something about suffering felt appropriate, twisted as he knew the logic was.

He realized he had a fever sometime in the early morning, judging from the bluish tint to the light peeking through his mostly-drawn curtains and the slanted angle of shadows cast by the window panes.

He probably should have accepted some of the potions. But he really, truly, just wanted to be left alone. What did it really matter if he was sick for one day or four? Or however long it took to get over an illness without potions?

From behind closed lids, he heard his door click open, metal dragged along the strike plate, a hinge creaking, a single step on the tile floor before footsteps met a persian rug. Draco almost sighed. It was near time for Theo to try and force some sense into him anyway, what with a new day dawning and all.

With the throb of his pulse shooting behind his eyes and a grotesque clamminess encasing his skin, Draco considered that perhaps this would be the day he gave in and finally let Theo help him.

The mattress dipped beside him.

The vanilla gave her away.

Draco couldn't open his eyes.

Then a hand brushed his hair from his forehead. Quick, practiced fingers that had done such a thing many, many times before. Her hand flipped, the back of her fingers now, gauging his temperature.

Her hand lingered. Trailed down the side of his face. Connected with his shoulder. Travelled down his arm. Found his hand.

She left fire in her wake. If he didn't have a fever before, he certainly did now. Her hand rested atop his: fingers not quite entwined, but slotted together in a way that suggested an inescapable entanglement.

"You *are* quite pathetic, aren't you?"

He opened his eyes, bleary and tired and filmed over from too much sleep, to find her sitting with one leg drawn up on the bed, watching him. She wore one of her trusty jumpers—purple, one of her softer ones, by his recollection—and her muggle denims. Her hair spiraled away from her head just as wild, just as magnificent as he remembered. And she had bags beneath her eyes. She'd glamourised them, but he could tell. Her hand slipped from his, reaching to his bedside table.

"Theo said you're being stubborn and won't take any potions." She held up a vial, offered him a close-lipped sort of smile.

It sounded rather petulant when she said it like that.

"Have you eaten anything recently?" she asked.

He could feel a cough strangling him deep in his throat. He kept his

mouth closed, breathing through the single, unblocked side of his nose. He shook his head slowly from one side to the other in a single drawn out motion, so as not to send the room spinning.

“Will you take it?” she asked, holding up the vial. “And then eat something?”

Slowly, he shook his head again.

She dropped her hand, resting the potion against her denims. She swallowed, tapping a finger against the vial. She’d bitten her nails quite short.

“Why not, Draco? You can’t just torture yourself. You clearly have a fever—”

“You’ll leave,” he said, forcing words through a sharp cough. His face pinched, forcing the cough back. “If I take it, you’ll leave.”

He hadn’t noticed how tightly she’d held her shoulders until they sank.

“I have to.”

“You don’t.”

“I—”

He coughed. Forced himself to speak through it, broken and awful as it was. “It’s been months. It’s not—we’re not—we should talk.” He rolled away from her, groaning as he coughed into his pillow, each heave ratcheting the tension behind his eyes tighter until he felt like they might simply erupt from his sockets. He cleared his throat, struggled to breathe, felt a hand at the back of his neck.

“Please,” she said, holding the potion to him.

He took it, incapable, as he always had been, of denying her. He downed the bright orange, electrifying solution in a single gulp.

She took the empty vial and set it back on his bedside table. He expected her to leave then, duties complete. Theo had forced him to take his potions by sending in the one and only person he couldn’t possibly say no to.

She surprised him by taking his hand. This time there was no doubt; fingers entwined.

“I just want you to know that I don’t hold it against you. The glass. And I don’t—you don’t have to protect me from your family.”

The orange potion sizzled down Draco’s throat, burning away mucus and healing sore muscles and tissue all at once. When he spoke, his voice came out stronger than it had been before, less rasped and broken.

“It’s still true that you’re my only family that matters. I haven’t regretted a moment of the disinheritance. It’s still happening.”

“I know.”

“So don’t go.”

Saying it left him breathless, despite the potion fortifying his lungs.

“I have to.”

He didn’t know if he wanted to hold her fingers tighter or rip his hand away.

“You really don’t—”

“I’m taking a bit of an extended holiday—with my parents. We’re going to Australia. They—they’ve finally sold their home there and they have some friends they wanted to visit and I—well, I’m joining them.”

“Will you be alright? Going there with them?”

She bent her forefinger, dragging it along the side of his: a small touch she watched with absolute fixation.

“I think so. It will be good—closure, I think. I’ll be gone almost three weeks.”

“And when you’re back?”

Draco didn’t know if it was the sudden introduction of healing potions in his system that buoyed his sinking hope, but it rose to the surface, bobbing uncomfortably in his throat, just there—wishing.

She squeezed his hand and pulled away. She stood, and distance had never felt so damning.

“I think we should talk, then,” she said.

He nodded, nearly choked by the hope.

She didn't quite leave, but didn't quite stay. Hovering in the space by the doorway, not fully committed to her exit. He watched her soft sigh more than he heard it. But he'd heard it enough times to know exactly how it sounded.

"I never wanted you to have to give them up for me."

Propped up on his elbows, still feeling a little unsteady, he said, "I'm giving them up with or without you. I'd much rather do it with you."

Her cheeks twitched, almost a smile, as if she *almost* gave herself permission to be pleased about that. But she kept her expression neutral. "I'll owl you when I get back."

With his chest tight, he sank back into his pillows once she'd gone. Eventually, he called Mopsy to bring him something to eat.

Chapter End Notes

[Endless musings](#), and [persephone_stone](#) are the best! i cannot thank them enough for the time they've invested in supporting this project!

welcome to day one of our daily chapter extravaganza (aka: 40k words of denouement, you've earned it)! which will culminate in our finale on 12/26. I'm aiming to post around 4 PM EST as has always been the case for this fic, but don't be alarmed if there's a bit of variance. thank you so much to everyone commenting, especially those who are so faithfully commenting on each chapter. i apologize for not responding to the comments, I simply to not have the time or bandwidth, but I cannot thank you enough for engaging with this story! i appreciate it SO much and I LOVE hearing your thoughts and speculation! thank you, thank you, thank you!

Chapter 43: +.166, +.166, +.166

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

July

“Feet off the fucking furniture.” Theo kicked Blaise’s ankles, knocking them from where they’d been perched on the coffee table. Draco rolled his eyes, accepting the drink Theo delivered, and indulging in a genuine smile for what felt like the first time in months.

Blaise, eternally unaffected by Theo’s ire as he was, simply pulled out his cigarette case and lit up in an alternative show of annoyance. Theo glared, let out a low, frustrated growl, and set Blaise’s drink down just out of his reach.

Scotch, cigarettes, and banter between Blaise and Theo. Not the worst way to spend a Friday evening, and truth be told, he doubted anything could dampen his mood after receiving an owl from Hermione that afternoon.

She’d returned from Australia.

They planned to meet in Diagon Alley the next day: *Saturday*.

A simple, predictable evening with drinks and friends seemed like a fine way to cap such a hopeful day.

Then Pansy Parkinson stepped through the Floo, gave them all one severely derisive sneer, and announced that they were boring old men.

“I’m making an effort to reestablish this friend group and you three would rather laze about on a Friday night,” she said, dragging them from the parlor and into one of the manor’s many entertaining spaces. This particular room included a large, well-stocked bar and spacious round table.

“Insults are a part of reestablishing a friend group?” Draco asked, incapable of suppressing a smile.

“And inviting yourself over?” Theo added.

She shrugged and pointed them to the table with a silent demand that they all sit. Theo and Draco obeyed; Blaise raided the bar and dropped more drinks and snacks on the table before taking his seat as well.

Pansy produced a pack of cards from a comically small pocket in her tight dress that *had* to have had an extension charm on it.

“She’s planning on robbing us, too,” Blaise said, entirely unfazed as he leaned back in his seat and propped his feet up on the table. He took a long drag from his cigarette, blowing the smoke towards the vaulted ceiling.

Draco nearly laughed at the way Theo’s hand twitched, too far away to knock either Blaise’s feet or the cigarette away. Pansy began dealing cards, having yet to fully explain what game they’d be playing or how extensively she planned to liberate them of their money. It wouldn’t have been much of a concern for Draco before recently, but now, he hardly had the discretionary income to waste on Pansy’s ruthless ability to out bet and outplay each of them while barely blinking. He could only assume she’d refined her skills in the years since he’d last gambled with her.

“Here’s how this is going to work,” Pansy started, flicking her head such that her fringe swayed as a curtain before returning to its perfect, neutral position. “I’m going to tell you that yes, I did move to France for a few years and yes, it was good for me to disconnect from this place for a while. But also yes, I did miss it here and yes, I missed all of you. And yes, I’m being obscenely sincere when I say that so we won’t be bringing it up again. And yes, I’m sticking around for good now so yes, you’re all stuck with me again. Any questions?”

“You’re *going* to tell us that, are you?” Draco lifted a brow.

“I just did, didn’t I?”

“If you say so,” he shrugged, smirk stealing his expression.

She threw a tiny olive at his face.

“Missed you too, Pans.”

“Yes we already covered the part where you missed me during your”—she grimaced—“illness.”

Theo snorted. “This isn’t so bad. Kind of reminds me of my birthday we spent drinking with Granger.”

Two legs of Blaise’s chair made contact with the floor again as his feet dropped from the table, laughing with a surprising volume and force. Blaise, of all people, did not often laugh loudly and unexpectedly.

“What’s so funny, then?” Theo asked, eyes narrowed.

Blaise made a gesture towards Draco.

Draco’s shoulders tensed. He could feel himself bristling. “Care to elaborate or are we playing charades?”

Blaise’s laughter stilled, features neutralizing as he graced them with his insight. “I had to remind you that you were betrothed.”

“Thanks for that, by the way,” Draco grumbled.

“Granger needed the reminder, too.”

“Again, many thanks.”

“And you both needed to have it pointed out that you hadn’t invited Astoria. Probably *for a reason*.”

Draco’s words spilled with more sincerity when he said it this time: “Thanks, for that, then. I think.”

Pansy cleared her throat across from them, tilting her head towards a pile of coins at the center of the table.

“So, to be clear, we’re in support of this Granger situation?” she asked.

Theo and Blaise responded simultaneously: “Yes.”

The rapidity with which they offered their agreement genuinely stunned Draco, rooting him to his seat for a moment as he rotated, watching them. Theo ignored him, barreling onward.

“And assuming Draco fixes this fucking mess when he sees her tomorrow, you’ll get to experience the joy that is drunk Granger, too.”

“Can’t wait,” Pansy said.

“No, really. She knows all kinds of strange and fascinating things. I’m getting a proper muggle education.”

“She’s going to have to dress better if I’m expected to socialize with her.” Pansy threw another galleon to the middle of the table. “I suppose I could always take her shopping, if I must.”

“I like how she dresses,” Draco said, setting his cards down.

Pansy’s smile, sickly sweet and coated in condescension, irritated him before she even said a word. “Of course you do, darling. You’re hopelessly in love with her.”

Draco narrowed his eyes, frowning. A feeling of being painfully on display made him want to shrink, to vanish.

“Don’t look so put out,” Pansy said. “If it counts for anything, she’s hopelessly in love with you, too.”

“And you know this from taking one lunch with her?”

Pansy’s head wobbled side to side as if she couldn’t decide if her jaw needed to hang open in disbelief or if she needed to shake everyone else’s stupidity from her perfect hair.

“It’s no wonder everything fell apart without me here. *Men.*”

Blaise made a sound that might generously be labeled as another small laugh.

Pansy lifted her brows, gaze tracking between the three of them, as if expecting a rebuttal, or an answer, or something resembling an explanation. She sighed; she’d refined the efficacy of such a long-suffering sound during her time in France. She sounded truly beleaguered, war-worn with a single sigh.

“Seems to me, as a completely nonpartisan, third party observer, that it’s a little more complicated than that.” She scooped the pile of gold from the center of the table and dragged it towards her. Had she won? Draco hadn’t been paying attention. “Seems more like the two of you got cold feet when you both realized how huge and how difficult it is to be *Draco Malfoy* and *Hermione Granger* in a long-term relationship.”

She shrugged as if that were obvious and dealt another hand.

“It’s not free, being you two. It’s going to cost you”—she frowned when she made eye contact with Draco, voice slipping into something disdainful—“well, it’s cost you everything, hasn’t it? Too much, if you ask me. But apparently, too much if you ask her, too.” She didn’t start

playing, but set her cards down on the table with a little too much force. The disdain in her tone swelled, pitch increasing. “I mean, what woman in her right mind wants someone she loves to lose his family and his name and his money and his *home* because of her? And so yes, from the *one lunch* I had with her I certainly got the sense that the great Hermione Granger is still the self-sacrificing sort.”

Draco opened his mouth to say—something? Anything? He didn’t know if he needed to defend himself or Hermione.

“And *you*,” she continued before Draco could make a sound. “Well, you let her be right, didn’t you? She said the cost wasn’t worth it and you agreed. The sooner you two idiots realize that your relationship is going to have costs and decide whether or not you’re willing to pay them, the better.”

She finished on a heavy breath, almost angry, agitated in the way she picked up her cards again, darted her gaze between the three of them, and then snapped, “Whose turn is it?”

Theo, brave soul that he was, attempted to answer.

“I think—”

“And don’t even get me started on the two of you,” she said, pointing a finger between Theo and Blaise.

“At us? What have we done?” Theo asked.

Blaise answered instead. “I think we’ve had enough brutal psychoanalysis for one night, Pans. Lovely to have you back.”

She rolled her eyes and held his eye contact for long enough that Draco got the sense they were attempting a silent conversation. He sipped his scotch rather than involve himself. He’d had enough of Pansy’s relationship advice dumped on him for one evening. His chest ached.

She had an uncanny, divination-adjacent sort of ability to see straight through him, through most people, and cut straight to the quick in order to bleed him dry of his excuses. Her accuracy annoyed him.

Draco had spent the better part of the last year fumbling his way towards a different, more distant relationship with his father, struggling to find the right path. In trying to protect Hermione from the debilitating disappointment that was his parents’ ever-apparent

unwillingness to change, he'd let her nurture an unrealistic hope. And then at Christmas he'd lost his cool, let years of resentment build up and explode, quite literally, in a way that put Hermione in danger, but also highlighted just how toxic and unrepentant his parents truly were.

Hermione knew she'd be forever at odds with Lucius Malfoy, and didn't want the same for Draco. And even though it felt like she'd abandoned him, given up and cast him aside, he'd given up, too, and with less fight than both of them deserved. He'd wallowed for months rather than reach out to her. He'd told himself it was because she didn't want him to. But just like with Pansy, his lack of action probably had more to do with his own fears of being rejected, doubly so, than it did with his understanding of her wishes.

They'd needed *some* space, *some* time, but somehow ended up with far too much of both.

Pansy released a breath, breaking her silent stalemate with Blaise.

"Yes, it's certainly lovely to be back." She turned her attention back to Draco and it took an embarrassing amount of self control not to recoil under her inspection once again. "So, do we think Granger is a spring or summer wedding sort of girl?"

—

On the one hand, Draco's trips to Gringotts took significantly less time when he didn't have to travel so deep underground to visit the generational vaults. On the other hand, not having access to those vaults inspired a new kind of anxiety deep in Draco's stomach that he'd never known before: financial insecurity.

Did most people feel this way? Was this how it felt to navigate the world and *not* have the ability to buy whatever he wanted? He didn't much care for it, as evidenced by the ache in his jaw when he realized he'd been grinding his teeth together.

He slid the jewelry box across the desk: the last of the Malfoy heirlooms to be returned to vaults he no longer had access to.

He'd returned the ring a month before, but he'd forgotten about the

ruby necklace, the one he'd never successfully given her anyway. It carried mostly unpleasant memories, and yet, watching as the Goblin reached across the desk and took the flat velvet box, Draco felt like he'd lost something precious.

"Mr. and Mrs. Malfoy have formally forfeited claim on any remaining furniture or belongings from the confiscated flat," the Goblin said, sliding a parchment towards Draco.

He ground his teeth tighter. He'd known that, but having it spelled out in writing irritated his already raw nerves. They'd wanted the expensive bits of jewelry back and nothing more. They'd washed their hands of him. Soon, he'd be removed from the wards too, the family magic, the blood magic. All of it.

"Is there anything else Gringotts can do for you today, Mr. Malfoy?"

"Yes," he said.

The Goblin waited for him to elaborate. Draco wondered, briefly, why he'd not been offered champagne. Perhaps that was another thing no longer afforded to him now that he could afford very little.

"I need to open a new account. My own, that is."

"There is a twenty galleon deposit minimum for account openings."

Draco's molars made an unsettling grinding noise as he forced his jaw shut, bit back the nasty thing he wanted to say. He did run a business after all; he had a stable income. The shop performed well and Blaise certainly knew how to manage its finances. That this Goblin didn't think he had even twenty galleons left to his name after his disinheritance—

He took a deep breath.

"Of course. I'm aware of the deposit minimum"—because he'd checked, mortifying as such a thought had been—"and I have it prepared."

He placed his galleons on the desk. The Goblin barely blinked, gathering the gold, counting it, and recording the totals in his ledger.

"You will be the primary account holder?"

"Yes."

“Any secondary or authorized parties you wish to have access to the account?”

It sprung from him on impulse. A stupid, wildly optimistic impulse.

“Yes.”

“Name?”

“Hermione Jean Granger.”

The Goblin looked up from his ledger, frowned, and restated Hermione’s name.

“Yes,” Draco confirmed. “Hermione Jean Granger.”

“Your secondary account holder will need to submit her wand for inspection and access verification to complete the process.”

Draco nodded. “Of course,” he said. He forced himself to believe it. He would be meeting her in less than an hour. And it was going to go well. He could feel it, he could manifest it, if he tried hard enough. It was going to go so fucking well.

—

Meeting for ice cream had been her idea. He liked to think the choice involved a touch of sentimentality, meant as a reminder of where much of it began: him bringing her ice cream when he had no business doing so.

He stood near the door to Florean Fortescue’s. A glance at his pocket watch told him he’d arrived early after such an expedient meeting at Gringotts. Waiting wasn’t good for him; it agitated his nerves. Left him bouncing his leg. Tapping his fingers against his trousers. Counting the seconds he swore he could hear ticking away on the watch inside his pocket.

He reached for it again, cool metal against his fingertips. She’d fixed it for him once, so long ago. Before he could pull it from his pocket and confirm for the umpteenth time that, indeed, it still wasn’t quite time, he caught sight of her riotous curls approaching.

He saw the exact moment her eyes found him, a tiny worried furrow smoothing from between her brows.

He didn't let himself think too hard about his actions. He simply did what came naturally, what had always come so naturally with her. He greeted her with a light hug, chin against her curls, savoring the sensation of her arms encircling his torso, if just for that moment.

She stepped back, a cautious smile pulling at her lips.

"Hi," she said.

"Hi." He tilted his head towards the door. "They have apple caramel again."

Her smile quirked brighter. "Do they? They'd taken it off the menu for a while."

She followed him inside, and what might have been an awkward reintroduction, standing in line at an ice cream shop, felt casual, enjoyable. The silence didn't feel damning. It felt like it usually did with her: easy, a natural respite from the din of life bustling around them. He liked sharing silences with her.

They ordered. He didn't even bother offering to pay. She forced her money onto the countertop before he'd even finished requesting his flavor.

When they sat in a corner booth by the window, with a lovely view of the street, she smiled at him. Something cautious, something hopeful.

"Hi."

"Hi," he said again, smiling back.

"Sorry," she said, exhaling. "I'm nervous." She let out a disbelieving, breathy laugh.

"That's ridiculous. It's just me—just us."

She nodded, chest and shoulders lifting as she inhaled. He watched her hold it for a beat and then, slowly, she let it out, shoulders sinking, tension unwinding.

"How was Australia?" he asked. Diligently, he forced himself not to watch her mouth as she ate a bite of her ice cream. The lecherous thought was there though, planted in his forebrain with echoes that

remembered what that mouth could do, how it tasted, how it felt.

“Oh, it was—it was alright. Good, for the most part.” She tilted her head once, features scrunching as she determined how to word what she might say next. He’d missed watching this process. “It was a bit uncomfortable, sometimes. But I think we needed it. We all had a good cry over a bottle of wine one night.”

“I’m sorry. I wish I could have helped.”

She looked at her ice cream, then back up at him. She smiled, small but bright. “Me too.” She swirled her spoon in her bowl. “You’re feeling better?”

“Much.” He allowed himself a grin. “Recovery from a nasty cold is actually quite quick when you take your potions and let people help you.”

“Imagine that.”

“Remarkable, in fact.”

“You were fairly pathetic looking.”

He nodded. “I got sick on my birthday and—well, my mother didn’t send any toffees this year, understandably. I suppose I was feeling a bit sorry for myself.”

He didn’t say it, but he knew they were on the same page, meeting somewhere in the middle.

He didn’t have her, either.

He’d been focusing on his expression, trying not to look too serious, too dour, too accusatory, when her hand found his on the tabletop, chilly fingers wrapping around his palm.

“It’s been a hard few months,” she said. “*I’m* sorry I wasn’t—there. With your parents—I just—”

He shook his head, stopped her.

“I know.”

She took a deep breath, wincing as she gnawed on the inside of her cheek.

“I regret it,” she said, eyes on their hands. She looked a little unsteady, but her voice came out clear, level. “I was trying to protect myself and, well, I made the decision for you, for us—that it wasn’t worth losing them. I’ll never do that again—no matter what we are to each other.”

“Don’t. Hermione, I let you. I decided I was bad for you. And I should have told you how bad it was—with them. I should have *picked* you.” He faltered, in search of his own version of Pansy’s insight. “It’ll never be easy, being us. But, it was worth it. It *is* worth it.”

She nodded, fingers pulsating pressure against his.

“I’m sorry.” This time, when she said it, it had a full stop.

“Me too.” His did as well.

He followed her gaze, watching their interlocked hands.

“Can we”—she swallowed mid-sentence, her grip on his hand tightening—“pretend it was a bad dream? The beginning of this year?”

He wished.

“I don’t think so. It was awful. But it was—good? Because now I know, and with absolute certainty.” He paused. Braced himself. Asked it. “Don’t you?”

She blinked, question settling against her skin, inside her brain. It took her a moment, perhaps to comprehend the scope of what he meant. But when she understood, her smile took his breath away, thieving his oxygen with every second it spread.

Years passed in moments, whole abandoned futures sliding back into place, possible once again. Coming together had always been easy when they let it, when they stopped fighting themselves, when they gave into the current that drew them in. They could have fought. They could have gone back and forth, scouring their mutual guilts and crimes and grievances. But instead, in a simple moment that eased six months of pain in a blink, they decided to move on.

“Come to my flat,” she said.

He puffed a disbelieving breath, the last air he had left. He chuckled, feeling so light, so genuinely hopeful.

“What for?”

“Forever.”

—

They'd barely taken one step out of the Floo and into Hermione's cramped flat when she burst into tears. Then she groaned, wiping at her face. Draco let himself laugh, stepping up to her, into her space, and cradled her head in his hands, thumbs swiping at warm tears.

“Overwhelmed?” he asked.

She laughed, too, but sounded rather annoyed about it. She nodded. “I missed you so much.” Her voice nearly gave out at the end, wiping her tears from her face with a determination that said she would not cry anymore. Her hands found his shirt instead, fingers walking from his lower ribs to the center of his chest. Her hands flattened, palms pressed against him. Then they curled, crumpling his shirt in her grip.

“Please?” she asked.

And he knew all the ways she meant it.

Please stay.

Please hold me.

Please forgive me.

Please kiss me.

He knew, because he meant them for himself, too.

His hands moved opposite each other. His right travelled from her cheek to the back of her skull, winding in her curls and pulling, ever so gently, to tilt her head upward. His left descended, from her jaw to her neck, fingers trailing lightly down her throat, between her breasts, to her waist where he wrapped his arm around her.

He'd pay any price for this.

When he kissed her—just outside the Floo grate, in a tiny flat he'd

never seen before, after months left unmoored, alone, and quite literally homeless—it felt like finally finding his place. He didn't need a manor or his expensive flat. He didn't need generational vaults at Gringotts or a name that opened doors.

He needed her, and the fire that shot through him when he tasted her lips, inhaled her sighs, shared her air.

He trapped her bottom lip between his teeth, applied enough pressure such that she whimpered, hands gripping and pulling at his shirt. He smirked as he released her lip, trailing a line of kisses along her jaw, towards her ear.

“Do I get a tour?” he asked, knowing she'd be able to hear the smile in his voice.

The breath whooshed out of her, a sort of half-laugh, half-groan. Her hands dropped from his chest, looping around his belt, guiding him by the waist as she pulled him away from the Floo.

“Yes,” she said. “This is my very small living room. As you can see, I don't own much furniture. A coffee table, here, and a sofa I won in a rather ill-advised bet.” She pulled him towards it, twisted them, and pushed him down onto the green velvet cushions. A blink later, she positioned herself in his lap, knees bracketing his hips as her hands flew to his jaw, demanding another kiss.

A groan slipped from his throat as his hands roamed the tops of her thighs, sliding around to her arse. He pulled her hips against his, unrepentant in the way he ground up into her, indecently aroused after having gone without her for so long.

“I have plenty of furniture,” he said, latching onto the skin at the base of her throat as her head tilted back. He slipped his hands beneath her jumper, pushing it up and over her head. “Just sitting in a ballroom getting no use.”

She wore a green lace bra, the same she'd procured for his birthday the year before. He hadn't intended on losing control of his voice, but the sound that escaped his lungs sounded mostly inhuman, feral in its overwhelming want.

“Did you wear this for me?” he asked as he traced his tongue along the laced edges. He surmised her nod by the way her curls moved in his periphery. If she'd intended to answer with her voice, the sound got caught in her throat, washed out by the panted breath she released

as his tongue circled her nipple over the lace of her pretty little bra.

She heaved a shaky breath, hands on his shoulders, then at his collar, fumbling with his buttons.

“Yes,” she finally said. “I hoped. I missed—I just, hoped.”

“You’re beautiful,” he whispered to her skin as she unbuttoned more of his shirt. When it finally fell open, her hands roamed his chest. She giggled.

“What?”

“Pansy Parkinson, of all people, sent me an owl and threatened me bodily harm if I didn’t wear my nicest lingerie today.”

“She’s bossier than you are.”

“She was right; I needed it.” And with that, she ground her hips down against him again, forcing a moan from his throat.

“Granger,” he nearly growled. “I love this sofa. I have missed this sofa. But I am not fucking you on it right now. I am having you in a bed.” He shifted forward, hands beneath her arse, and lifted her off his lap.

She sighed, dramatic and overdone, a glorious smile giving her away. She stood and reached for his arm, pulling him up as well. “This way.”

He needed to catch his breath. He needed to slow this down. Just a little, just enough. He wanted to savor this, savor her, savor this tiny fucking flat and all the places he might love her in it.

“What about my tour?” he asked as he rose, smirk firmly in residence on his face.

She rolled her eyes, gesturing rather haphazardly at the space around them.

“Well, you can see the entire kitchen from right here because this is a very small flat. I don’t even have a kitchen table yet, but if I did, it would go right about here”—more vague gesturing—“for now I’ve just been using the sofa—”

“Good countertops,” he said, cutting her off.

Her head tilted, a bolt of confusion mixed with frustration as she repeated him.

“Good countertops?”

He closed the distance between them again, fingers catching easily around her waist, dancing along ribs, traveling towards her spine. He bent.

“Perfect height,” he said, and hoisted her up, taking two deep strides to plant her on the countertop in question. He muffled her surprised laugh with his mouth, drawing her in for another kiss.

His fingers worked the button to her denims, his lips still desperate to devour every inch of her skin as he did so. She spoke as she wriggled, broken words as she twisted and leaned so he could peel her clothes off.

“I thought”—a lean to the left, hand braced on his shoulder—“you wanted the bedroom?” She leaned to the right; he yanked her denims down the rest of the way. Her knickers, too.

“Yes, and we’ll get there,” he said, dropping to his knees as he placed a kiss on the inside of her thigh. He tugged her forward, to the very edge of the counter. “But first—”

She whined, hand slapping down on the countertop when he tasted her. He lifted her knees over his shoulders, gripping her hips to hold her in place as he reacquainted himself with all the ways he might use his mouth to make her moan and sigh and keen so prettily.

A nearly inaudible *oh* transformed into a whimper as one of her hands found his hair, dragging her nails through it. He sucked directly on her clit, swirling his tongue such that her sharp inhale seemed to surprise even her.

Something fell into the sink beside them with a clatter: a jar or a bowl or something else of entirely no consequence.

He loosened his grip on her hips just as her fingers scraped across his scalp again.

He slipped a finger inside her—then another—twisting and dragging and pulling. He could hardly believe how little time it took her, how close and how ready she’d been, already reduced to a writhing mess on her countertops.

The *oh* came loudly, this time.

Her hands didn't leave his hair, not until she'd caught her breath, descending from her orgasm. She sat straighter as he stood, hands fisting his open shirt, using it to pull him towards her before she forced it off his shoulders. She clung to him, in her bra and nothing else.

She kissed the center of his chest and it sent warmth radiating out from her point of impact.

She kissed the base of his throat, and it stalled his breathing, hand curled around her waist.

She trailed her fingers down his arm, holding his left hand in her right.

She whispered in his ear as he unhooked her bra.

"Drop your glammers?" she asked, words barely audible. Her eyes darted to his left arm, held between them. "You don't need them. Especially not with me. I'll drop mine, too."

He expected the pang in his chest to feel like panic, like fear, exposure rubbing him raw. He felt some fear, but mostly—inexplicably—he felt something like peace: resignation without the sense of failure. He trusted her not to judge him for the vile brand on his arm, not to look at him any differently. Not after all this time.

He pulled his wand from his trouser pocket and cast a silent *finite* on himself. Hermione didn't even spare a glance for his Dark Mark. Instead, she reached for his wand, pulling it tentatively from his grip with an unspoken *May I?* etched in the set of her jaw. With his wand, she cast a *finite* on herself.

He knew she'd been hiding dark circles under the eyes; he didn't know about the scar above her right brow. Tiny, almost invisible, probably completely unnoticeable to everyone she came across on a day-to-day basis. But Draco had made a study of her features, of the face that bore them.

He'd blown up all the glassware and she'd had a tiny stream of blood dripping down the side of her face.

"I can vanish it for you."

"Don't, Draco. Not now. Later"—she pleaded with her eyes—"we'll talk about it later. But right now. Will you please—*please* take me to

bed.”

His yes disappeared into the fabric of her skin, answering as he kissed her shoulder, pulling her from the counter. She wobbled, unsteady for a moment, before she led him to the tiny corridor, entirely naked, mind-bogglingly beautiful.

Hand in his, she pulled him to follow. He didn't need the direction; he would follow her anywhere.

She tilted her head to the right. “That's the guest room. As you can see, I have no furniture for it.”

He pinned her to the open door jamb, dropping a kiss to her clavicle. His belt fell to the floor, liberated from his trousers.

“A great space for brewing,” he said. She nodded, sighed, canted against him as he kissed her neck.

She tilted her head to the left, to the door opposite them.

“That's the bathroom, very small.”

“Room in the shower for two?”

“We'd have to stand very close.”

“I don't mind.”

He kissed her lips again, tongue lazy and satisfied as he explored her. Warmth hummed in his bones, not enough to scorch, but plenty to sate, to fuel him. It all felt a bit dreamlike: having her, touching her, pulling delicious little moans and whimpers from her with his touch. He never wanted to wake.

She unbuttoned his trousers, shoved them down, and made an impatient noise when she realized he still wore his shoes and had to separate from her long enough to kick them off and step out of his clothes. When her hand slipped inside the waistband to his underwear, she must have heard his breath catch as he kissed the skin beneath her jaw.

With her hand wrapped around his cock, she pumped slowly, several deadly strokes until his control broke. He dipped, hands beneath her arse to lift her up, into his arms. His teeth grazed her neck before coming to rest at her ear.

“Bedroom.” Partly a question, mostly a command. He rocked against her, heat exploding into flames that licked the underside of his skin. Her shoulder bore the brunt of his groan as he held her flush against him, a single layer of fabric separating them.

A vague gesture, a limp arm, pointing generally down the corridor.

“Only one door left,” she breathed and he nodded against her skin, moving before he’d even fully realized his legs had gone into motion.

Left unlatched, the door to her bedroom swung open with the tiniest push.

“You got a new bed,” he said, a quiet observation as he lowered her onto it and finally rid himself of his underwear.

“I got used to having more room, even sharing.”

She pulled him into the bed with her, facing each other, side by side. He couldn’t help but grin: a stupidly wide, idiotic one.

To be in a bed with her again.

“Your sheets are white.”

“I left the burgundy with you.”

She wrapped her arms around his neck as he shifted onto his elbows, closer, partly above her.

“I love those sheets,” he said. A kiss at her temple. “Those hideous, Gryffindor sheets— *gods*, I’ve missed you.”

Her grip around his neck and shoulders tightened: no more room left to pull him in, but perhaps to hold him there.

“Speaking of sheets, I’m cold.” She breathed a quiet laugh, eyes darting towards the foot of the bed where they’d thrown the covers. He laughed as he leaned down and grabbed them, pulling white sheets and an atrocious quilt up to cover them.

She made a happy, contented sound against his skin. Vibrations hummed against him.

“Cozy,” she whispered.

“Perfect.”

He shifted, adjusted again, a slow drag of his body against hers, arousal not forgotten, but shifting towards something slower, sweeter. He bracketed his arms around her shoulders, hovering face to face. Her chest moved his when she inhaled, noses brushing.

He took advantage of their proximity, of how much easier it was to have hard conversations with her when they were close, sharing thoughts as much as oxygen or body heat.

“You aren’t allowed to leave me again.”

She shook her head. “You aren’t allowed to let me.”

He shook his.

He kissed her shoulder, her chest, her heart, and upwards again: her neck, her jaw, her lips.

When they came apart, lungs desperate for air, he forced words to form from heaving breath. “And when I ask you to marry me, you’re going to say yes.”

She canted against him, a sharp intake followed by a bitten back sound deep in her throat.

“I am,” she said, mouth on his, assent barrelling straight through him.

“And we’re going to get married.”

She nodded with her face pressed to his, hands clutching at his shoulders as he sank into her.

“Yes,” she breathed.

“And I’m going to spend every day of my life loving you.”

“Yes.”

“And you’re going to let me.”

“Yes,” again.

“Fuck—Hermione.”

“Yes,” seemed to be all she could say, and it was all he wanted to hear.

Chapter End Notes

my darlings [Endless_musings](#), and [persephone_stone](#) are the greatest, and hopefully y'all know that by now!

just...thank you. I've said it so many times already and it's still not enough. thank you so, so much for reading!

Chapter 44: + .250, + .250, + .250

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

August

After that day in early July when they came together again—relief soaked in sweat, pressed against skin, apologies traded with forgiveness in the quiet spaces between affirmations of love and adoration—Draco simply never left. She'd invited him into her home under the pretense of *forever*, and they'd both taken it rather literally.

They didn't start trying to cram his furniture in the flat until a month of relearning each other had passed. July had somehow managed to become simultaneously the most intense (sex, apologies, forgiveness, understanding, *sex*) and most cautious (fear, hope, fragility, healing) month of his life. But being able to work through those things, sequestered in a tiny little flat with just her (and Crookshanks), could not have been more perfect. He couldn't have imagined a better outcome to the months he'd spent without her.

I'm sorry I never explained how bad it really was with my parents, from him.

I'm sorry I tried to decide what was best for both of us, from her.

I don't think I'm ready to vanish my Dark Mark, from him.

I don't think I'm ready to vanish my scar, from her.

I love you, from both.

I want kids.

At least two.

Being an only child was lonely.

It was.

We're doing this.

We're doing this.

Towards the end of the month he asked: "What are we doing for Potter's birthday this year?"

She stared at him with open astonishment, quickly supplanted by affection. "He's out of the country with Ginny and James on holiday. Perhaps we can spend that week moving your furniture in."

In a reversal of how it had once begun, he moved his belongings into her flat. And by *moved*, he meant *crammed*. And by *crammed*, he more accurately meant *barely fit*. He had to leave several pieces in Theo's ballroom for Pansy to sell. Moving, too, took more time, more effort, and a lot more energy, it seemed, when one had a regular job to attend.

By the end of the first week of August, Draco vowed to himself that he'd never move again. At least, not unless absolutely necessary; he did not care how tiny Hermione's flat was.

In the corner of their newly cramped living room, Hermione sank into a black leather wingback.

"I've missed this one." She said it with a sigh and a smile and something so simple and content it stole Draco's breath. She pulled her favorite crocheted blanket from where it lay draped over the back of her armchair, and cozied herself up. "One of my favorite places to read."

Draco tapped at one of their coffee tables with the toe of his shoe. "Two coffee tables seems a bit much," he said.

She smiled, breathed a small laugh. "Well, as it's presently covered in several stacks of books, we clearly need it. We'll figure out what to do with it once we have the book situation sorted."

"We have more books now than the last time we lived together." He stepped around the tables, avoided a small book tower, and leaned against the arm of her chair.

"Speaking of, perhaps we can move some potions texts into the spare room." She leaned and looked up at him as she spoke. "You could put together a brewing set up in there." She poked her fingers through the crocheted holes in her blanket, grazing the side of his thigh.

"You don't want to use it as an actual guest room?"

She shrugged. “A guest room would be lovely, but you like to brew outside of work and I”—she dragged her teeth across her bottom lip—“I do enjoy watching you work.” He smirked as she rushed an explanation out, barely allowing him a blink to savor her compliment. “It’s relaxing, seeing you work. And I’ve been doing some experimenting of my own. I—well, I had a sudden abundance of spare time this year so I started fiddling with charms.”

Draco’s cheeks strained from his smirking. She’d be furious at how self-satisfied he looked, but he couldn’t help himself. He lifted the blanket from her lap, draped it across the back of her chair, and pulled her hand into his. With a fond sigh, she stood when he tugged at her, walking around the arm of the chair and lining herself up against him.

This sort of casual embrace ranked high on his list of ways he loved to hold her. Conversations had against curls, hands holding waists, fingers trailing spines: easy touches he now counted himself lucky to have.

“You didn’t blow through the rest of the biographies at your little book shop, did you?”

Her fingers flexed at his stomach, twisting his shirt. When she peeked up at him through a cluster of curls, the tiniest flush of pink spotted her cheeks. She cleared her throat before she spoke, steadying herself.

“I’m up to the J’s now, actually.” She leaned harder against him, chest pressed to his. Draco had to push back in order to prevent himself from tipping over the arm of the chair. “I had *a lot* of time, and fewer meddlesome prats trying to interfere with my progress.”

That could have hurt, could have been intended to hurt, but he didn’t take it that way and she didn’t mean it that way. They were past the hurting, determined not to have any more of it.

“Who? Me?”

She rolled her eyes and breathed a laugh, eyes fluttering as he dropped a kiss at her temple.

“I’ve finished unpacking the kitchen, by the way,” he said, fully invested in earning as much goodwill from her as he could. “I’ve organized all our tea strainers right next to the kettle.”

She hummed a noise that bordered between acknowledgement and

distraction. Her fingers played with his shirt fabric, knuckles brushing his stomach. It *almost* felt like she might start unbuttoning his shirt. Additionally, like she had zero interest in tea strainers.

Crookshanks hopped onto the chair, perching himself on the arm and forcing his head into Hermione's hands.

"Crooks seems happy to have you back," she said with a smile, and with almost no evidence to support that statement. Draco assumed she simply believed what she wanted to believe about the cat's affections; she did have a bit of blind spot where the orange menace was concerned.

"If anything," Draco said, twisting to offer a few scratches along the cat's neck, "Crooks is pleased because my presence means more Theo. And more Theo means more treats, since he's apparently physically incapable of visiting without giving Crookshanks at least four or five."

"We may need to hide the treat jar."

Draco smiled. "How old is Crookshanks now? Maybe we just let the old man enjoy himself."

Hermione dropped her head against his chest as if he'd showered her in a storm of his most romantic words. She sighed against his placket, one arm around his waist tightening.

Draco entered a haze. Was this what they called domestic bliss? Was this why someone, somewhere, idiotically happy, had coined such a term? The serenity of it sparkled in his veins, settling like a shimmering Floo powder in his soul that transported him instantly, easily, to his calmest, to his most at ease.

He almost didn't hear the owl tapping on the window. Almost.

He held Hermione tighter, just for a moment, before allowing her to break away with a grin, greeting their interloper.

The owl landed on a stack of books next to him. At first glance, Draco thought his parents had written him, heart plummeting. But the eagle owl presently skewering him with an unamused stare didn't belong to the Malfoy Estate, at least, not as far as he knew.

"Is that?" Hermione began, vocalizing the same concern that had just seized him.

He shook his head. “No, not theirs.”

She nodded and walked to the kitchen, presumably to acquire a treat for the rather imperious winged creature now presenting its leg to Draco. He removed the parchment, which unrolled and flattened into a crisp envelope in his hands.

Hermione returned, treat prepared as payment, which the owl took with a snap and flew off.

Flipping the envelope over, Draco found a sigil for the Greengrass estate stamped in the wax seal. He sank into the armchair, baffled in the next moment to find Hermione crawling into the chair with him, curling up with a smirk.

“Welcome to my lap,” he said, cracking open the seal.

Her words coasted against his neck. “Happy to be here.”

A puff of shimmering silver confetti burst from the envelope, followed by a glittering invitation.

Draco didn’t intend to vocalize his “huh” out loud, but evidently did nevertheless. “Astoria is getting married.”

“In October,” Hermione added as she leaned forward to read the invitation. One of her wild curls brushed the side of his face. He rounded his lips and blew, sending the curl out of his line of sight. Hermione squirmed. “Two months? That’s quite short notice.”

Draco rested his chin on her shoulder as she continued reading the details on the floating invitation. First he smirked, then he smiled, then he laughed.

She twisted, wearing her own smile. “*Why* are you laughing in my ear like that?”

“She’s pregnant.”

A small jolt of surprise, followed by recognition.

“Astoria?”

“Two months’ notice for a pureblood wedding? She’s pregnant. I have no doubt.” His chuckling subsided, leaving only a grin.

“And you’re—pleased about that?”

“It certainly suggests she’s going to be marrying someone she actually likes.”

“Someone who’s not you.”

Truth be told, Draco’s thoughts about Astoria in that moment had centered exclusively around his happiness that she’d found someone she wanted to be with. He’d mentally sidestepped their history of being betrothed. The edge of possessiveness in Hermione’s tone told him that she hadn’t. Further, it ignited a supreme sense of smugness deep inside his chest.

That smugness spilled into a smirk.

“Don’t start,” she said, cutting him off as he opened his mouth to speak. “I heard it, too.” She scrunched up her face, looked at him, and said, “I’m not jealous.”

“Of course not.” He was glad she didn’t smack him for smirking again.

She did roll her eyes, though, and he definitely deserved it. She plucked the invitation from the air, gave it another read, then set it aside on the table.

“I suppose this means we’re going to your ex-betrothed’s wedding.”

—

August passed lazily. Sex on the sofa. Sex in their bed. Attempted, though unsuccessful, sex in their tiny shower. Sex on brewing benches, against doors, and pinned to walls. Many and varied ill-advised places, all things considered. But Draco found himself struggling to resist the voice in the back of his head that reminded him of every surface, every place in their flat, that he hadn’t had her yet. He had a whole new world, small as it may be, to have her in. And once he’d pointed out the potential *achievement* in it, in a literal fucking tour of their flat, well, that was the day he had her on the kitchen table.

Thank the gods for *scourgify*.

But more than the sex and the persistent muggy heat and the new

routines involving his own regular working schedule now, Draco truly lazed with her. He spent tired evenings after a long day at the shop reading a book on the sofa while she and Crookshanks sat and cuddled nearby. Or he spent a weekend fiddling with new potion variations while Hermione watched, or experimented with magic of her own. Or they simply talked, whether it be nose to nose in their bed or across from each other at the kitchen table, negotiating over the scar she wasn't ready to vanish. Not until he was ready to forgive himself for the Dark Mark. They caught each other up on six months lived apart and made cautious, hopeful, wild plans for their future.

On one such lazy evening, Draco sat with *The Count of Monte Cristo* open in his lap, squinting at the fine print, and cursing its reintroduction to his life. Hermione laid on the sofa next to him, cold toes wedged beneath his legs as she worked her way through a journal on magical beasts sent to her by Luna Lovegood, all the way from South America.

The Floo flared bright green, blinding Draco for a moment, before he recognized Pansy Parkinson standing in their living room.

Hermione jolted up in surprise; Draco merely closed his book.

“Gods, you two are boring. Really?”

“Excuse me?” Hermione asked with a meaner edge to her tone than he'd heard from her in years. Perhaps since *school*.

Pansy swiped several green cinders from her sleeve. “You're just”—a vague gesture around the living room—“reading together? Like your bodies have already given out and the sofa cushions soothe the ache in your old rotting bones?”

Draco nearly told her all the ways his body was still in perfect working order, specifically in the form of a list of all the places he'd fucked Hermione within his current line of sight. Pansy's exaggerated shock stalled his tongue.

“Granger. What in the ever living fuck are you wearing?”

Draco glanced sideways, forgetting what she had on, finding his interest piqued over Pansy's horrified outburst. Hermione looked down at her pajamas.

She wore her red, plaid pajama bottoms. Drawstring style, perhaps a bit big on her, but Draco had no complaints. She had on one of her

sleeping camisoles, a simple white cotton. Sure, it wasn't the finest nightgown or pureblood dressing he'd seen his mother don when he was a child. But that was part of Hermione's charm: her unassuming, humble, simplicity in some things. Fashion choices being one of them.

"I'm dressed for bed, Pansy." Draco watched with rapt fascination as Hermione's face and tone alternated between something genuinely offended, tentatively amused, and surprisingly exasperated. All of it coated in a strange cover of fondness.

What an absolutely bizarre thing to witness.

"It's seven on a Friday evening." Pansy uncrossed her arms, pinched the bridge of her nose and lifted her shoulders as she dragged a deep, dramatic inhale. "Alright. This is a lot to unpack. First of all, you need new sleepwear. Ideally something silk, or satin. The camisole isn't a terrible idea but don't you want his"—a gesture at Draco—"hands to be able to glide over you and not get caught on cotton or flannel? And gods, give him a little skin to touch below the shoulders. Merlin, Granger."

Hermione's reaction to Pansy's general *Pansy-ness* seemed to favor genuine offense as a bright red flush crawled up her neck and over her tightly clenched jaw. Pansy, undeterred, battled on.

"And further, you should not be in your sleeping clothes this early in the evening." She shook her head, tutting. *That* grated on Draco's nerves. His mother liked to *tut*. "I'm appalled, honestly."

Hermione sat straighter, red flush slowly settling into pink before fading out. "I've gathered your general distaste, yes."

Pansy loosed a derisive snort and set off down the corridor, slinging words back at them as she walked. "I've come to collect you two. We're going to Theo's."

Draco lifted his voice, hoping it carried to wherever Pansy intended on going in their flat. Hermione just looked baffled again. "I believe we're reading, actually, Pans. Hermione catches up on her reading on Fridays."

That earned him a fond smile from Hermione that pierced through her confusion.

Pansy reappeared from the corridor, head peeking around the corner. "Well isn't that just disgustingly domestic." She glanced back down

the hall. “One of these is the bedroom, I assume? I’ll just pick your outfits, then.”

Pansy dipped out of sight again as Hermione shot to her feet. She lifted her hands, a confused, searching sort of posture, as she turned to Draco.

“Is she just going to—rifile through our stuff?”

Draco finally set his book aside, sighing, and resigning himself to the change of trajectory being forced upon his evening.

“Yes.” Then, with even more resignation. “But she’ll pick something nice.”

“That’s—that’s not the point. She can’t just go through our stuff.”

Hermione took a single step away from the sofa, clearly intent on putting a stop to Pansy’s plans, only to find Pansy barreling back into the living room, fringe jostled.

Wide, disgusted eyes scanned their living room. “You two must have a copy of *Fantastic Beasts* here somewhere, right? There’s an unidentified creature in your bedroom.” She drew a finger through her fringe, resetting it to its perfect, pre-jostled position. “I do believe I’ve barely escaped with my life.”

“That’ll be Crookshanks.”

Pansy arched a brow. “Is that the species name?”

“No Pans, it’s”—he stumbled, caught for a moment between words: her cat or theirs?—“he’s a cat. I said the same thing at first, but he grows on you.”

Hermione simply glared at the both of them. At Pansy, he assumed, for insulting her best feline companion, and him, for admitting to ever having had disparaging thoughts about the beast.

“Pansy,” Hermione began, leveling her tone into something calm. “You can’t just—I don’t know what to call this. Does it count as breaking and entering?”

Before he could stop himself, Draco found his hand at the back of his neck, massaging tense muscles.

“I added her to the wards.”

Hermione sighed. “Of course you did. Blaise and Theo, too, I assume? Should I acclimatize myself to unannounced entry?”

“Probably,” Pansy said. “If we’re looking for crime designations, we could call this attempted kidnapping.” She turned and pointed a perfectly lacquered nail at Draco. “You, take the orange monster. Granger and I need some girl time.”

Evidently, Hermione’s confusion prevented her from putting up more of a fight. Instead, she allowed Pansy to loop her beneath the elbow and pull her down the corridor, a deep line carved between her brows as she looked at him with a sort of *What is happening?* expression. Much as he should have had sympathy for her, Draco chuckled, rolling his lips between his teeth in an attempt to hold the sound at bay.

He heard what he assumed was the door to their bedroom slam shut with a touch more aggression than he might have liked. A moment later, Crookshanks came slinking into the living room with a disgruntled *meow*.

Draco sank back onto the green sofa and invited his fellow outcast to join him. Apparently *girl time* meant no cats, either.

Crookshanks settled, curled up beside Draco.

“I suppose it’s a good thing I hadn’t changed yet, isn’t it Crooks?” He offered the cat a few scratches behind his ears, generally a safe bet to earn a bit of goodwill from him. Crookshanks’s tail unwound from his curled position, gave a swish, then returned to his bundle.

A thump from beyond the darkened corridor drew Draco’s attention. The cat seemed rather unperturbed.

“You have better hearing than me, right? You’ll let me know if there’s an emergency in there, won’t you?” His scratches migrated from ears to neck to tiny orange shoulders. “Of course you will, you’re a good boy. But you mustn’t tell Hermione I’ve admitted that.”

Several minutes later, wherein Draco absolutely did not carry on a conversation with the cat attempting to sleep beside him, Hermione and Pansy emerged from the bedroom.

Hermione wore a pair of tight fitting, dark denims and a rather silky looking blouse—neither of which he’d ever seen before.

“Was that already in the closet?” he asked.

Pansy ignored him.

“Granger owns an offensive amount of denim. I’m definitely taking her shopping. Tomorrow, ideally. This can’t stand.”

Behind Pansy, Hermione shook her head silently, eyes rolling, as she suppressed an exasperated smile tugging at the corners of her mouth.

“I was surprised to find she had a few nice bras, though,” Pansy added.

Hermione’s good natured amusement fizzled, replaced by a faint blush.

“Alright, let’s go.” Pansy marched to the Floo with barely a glance back. “I need to make sure Theo and Blaise have followed my directions in party planning. If you two don’t come through within five minutes I’m coming back and dragging you.”

“What? No critique of my outfit?” Draco asked, not entirely sure if he meant to goad Pansy or impress upon Hermione that he was, indeed, acceptably stylish.

Pansy made a disgusted, annoyed sort of sound as she crossed her arms. “Your ensemble is perfectly adequate as always, though a touch boring. You could really do with some variety.” Deliberately, her gaze tracked from his head to his toes. He smirked when he saw her finally land on his feet and the snitch-printed socks Hermione had given him. Pansy sighed as if mortally offended, then sneered. “Wear a brogue—a wingtip, preferably. Cordovan, if you have a matching belt.”

She turned without another word and disappeared through the Floo. When Draco looked at Hermione, he felt as if he could see the words *brogue* and *wingtip* and *cordovan* creeping across her face. Words she probably knew in other contexts, but stringing them together under the lens of men’s fashion seemed to momentarily debilitate her.

He grinned as he walked by her, letting his fingers graze her silk blouse, finding her waist as he bent to kiss the top of her head. She wore perfume, too, something more floral than she usually opted for.

“I’ll be right back,” he said. “I need to change my belt before we volunteer for our own kidnapping.”

That seemed to snap her out of it.

“I can’t decide if I like Pansy or not.” She shook herself, as if seeking to throw off unwanted or unwarranted affection. “Perhaps I’ll teach Theo about Stockholm Syndrome this evening.”

Spending a Friday night at Theo’s, drinking and gambling and having an all around good time, despite lectures on Stockholm Syndrome and Pansy’s lack of boundaries, was a vastly preferable way to spend time, in Draco’s opinion, than finally having to face Hermione’s friends again the following week.

Seeing James, *that* Draco was excited about. The rest of it? Weasleys, former Weasleys, Potters of both the scarhead and married-in variety? That he could do without. He didn’t much look forward to his awkward reintroduction to Hermione’s friends. No easy explanation existed to acknowledge that something terrible had happened between them, they’d both realized it and moved forward, and now were just as deeply involved, even more so, than they had been before.

“Are you nervous?” Hermione asked, stepping to the living room in a sundress Pansy made her buy the week before. Draco walked a fine line between effusively complimenting her—because truly, she looked divine and Pansy had excellent taste—and downplaying his interest in her new wardrobe pieces so as not to offend the way she normally dressed.

But this particular outfit, a tight bodice with little straps and a flaring skirt in a pretty cream color? She looked sun-kissed and good enough to eat. Which he might have tried getting away with had she not just pointed out the nerves he’d been so diligently ignoring.

“No, I’m fine.”

She didn’t exactly roll her eyes, but the knowing quirk at the edge of her smile felt like it conveyed much of the same idea. She wound a few curls around her fingers, twisting and pulling and repositioning them.

“Is my hair alright?”

She fought this war every year when humidity made its appearance in

the summer, when muggy afternoons puffed up her curls and left them looking even more wild and untamed than usual. Draco was truly, devastatingly honest when he said, “It’s perfect.”

That time she did roll her eyes, but took his arm regardless.

“You do seem a bit nervous,” she added as she reached for a pinch of Floo powder.

“I haven’t seen any of them since—well, I did see Potter for a few minutes when he stopped by the shop a couple of months ago.”

Poised to toss the powder into the fireplace, Hermione stilled.

“Harry did what?”

“He was worried about you.”

“He never mentioned going to see you.”

Draco gave her arm a light squeeze. “We didn’t exactly uncover any great truths about the nature of sadness. We mostly just—threatened each other. Or perhaps I was the only one doing any threatening?” He tilted his head as Hermione finally tossed the Floo powder down. “Honestly, I can’t remember.”

On the other side of the Floo, stepping into Grimmauld Place, the pressure on Draco’s arm drew his attention back to Hermione.

“Ron and Lavender are engaged. Did I tell you? I don’t think I did.”

“You did not.”

She wore a distant expression as she scanned the living room, perhaps waiting to be greeted. When she looked back up at him, Draco had difficulty discerning the meaning behind the way her brows drew together but lifted towards the middle, muscles around her eyes tense, but visibly forced to remain neutral.

“Well—they are,” she said.

Draco blinked, taking a shot at what her expression might mean. Divining it, perhaps.

“Are you wanting me to be jealous? Or to expect *you* to be jealous?”

“What? No. Of course not.”

He arched a brow.

“Well, maybe a bit. Just in the way that makes you a little”—she made a couple of unintelligible gestures—“handsy, I suppose.”

His other brow joined the arched one, both lifted in a sort of amused surprise.

“At your godson’s first birthday party?”

With all the faux scandal he could muster, and an overwhelmingly pleased sensation bloomed behind his ribs, Draco leaned to her ear. His hands wandered, clinging to her waist, sliding around to her back, finding her spine.

“You don’t want me to get handsy, do you, Hermione? Were you hoping I’d mention how there’s no way you’re wearing a bra with this tight little bodice and these very thin straps?”

She sucked in a breath, but swatted at his arm.

“Not—right now.” A hint of pink rose high in her cheeks, just enough that he felt successful in having had some effect on her. “Social engagements do happen to be a lot more entertaining with you around, though. Even those that involve my adorable godson.”

“Speaking of”—he pulled her towards the corridor, as it became clear that a welcome to the Potter’s house was too much to expect—“where is he, do you think? I’ve quite missed him.”

“You did?”

“I have a gift with children, remember?”

Ginny found them in the corridor. She was panting and a touch out of breath, with the child in question perched on her hip.

“Just barging in without waiting for a greeting? I thought your pureblood sensibilities were above that, Malfoy,” Ginny greeted with a smirk, still a bit winded.

It was as if nothing had changed, no time had passed, and they hadn’t slipped oddly out of touch after being thrown into each other’s orbits for so long.

“Making guests wait an offensive amount of time before you’ll deign to grace them with your presence? How gauche, Weaslette.”

Ginny snorted and handed James off to him without preamble. Hermione made a disappointed sound from beside him.

“Enjoy your insults while you can, Malfoy. Harry and I are trying for number two.”

Draco couldn't bring himself to sneer, not while smiling at James and how absurdly large he'd grown in the months since Draco last saw him. He looked so much more person-shaped now.

“That is far, far more information than I ever wanted to know about Potter's sex life. Thank you for the nightmares, Weaslette.”

“Speaking of Harry, I need to go figure out where he and Ron have run off to. You two are in charge of the birthday boy.” She gestured with a pointing finger between them, as if assigning responsibility with a look, and took a single step away before faltering. She turned back and looked directly at Draco.

“I already caved and let him have cake. I'm well aware of your cake sneaking reputation, Malfoy. Don't give him any more sugar.”

Draco didn't. Though he very seriously wanted to the moment they stepped into the bustling kitchen filled with far more red hair than he generally liked to expose himself to. James's grabby little hands immediately started reaching out towards the long central table, laden in cakes and cookies and other general confectionaries that Draco wanted for himself and would have been very pleased to share with James.

Hermione steered them to the far end of the table instead, eyeing him with a far too amused smile that told him she knew exactly what he was thinking. Frankly, he didn't appreciate it.

“It's not like I can have some in front of him,” he said as a sort of defense. “I will resist.” James babbled in his lap, occasionally stumbling onto real words but mostly distracted by the transfigured spoons Hermione charmed into dancing on the table for him.

“You poor, suffering soul. How will you survive without your sweets?”

He narrowed his eyes. “Such little sympathy.”

She giggled, smiled wide at James, and chatted happily with the birthday boy until Molly Weasley came to take him away.

Draco didn't miss the strained, almost twitchy expression on Molly's face as James changed hands.

"I might have expressly forbidden her from interrogating you today," Hermione said.

Draco spared very little thought for members of the Weasley clan, as a general rule, so he hadn't put much consideration into whether the matriarch might want to have words with him. Belatedly, he now realized he owed Hermione a debt for preventing such an unpleasant eventuality from unfolding. Perhaps he could eat his dessert off her later. She might enjoy that, and it would be fun for him, too. It felt like an appropriate thanks.

Neville found them in the corridor, on their way to escape some of the hustle and bustle that a kitchen full of Weasleys easily dissolved into. He offered a harried "hello," something about not being able to stay long, and hoisted a large, poorly wrapped gift beneath his arm.

Draco carried a slice of cake on a small plate in his hands. He nearly dropped it when Neville added before he left, in a completely casual tone, that Hogwarts had a temporary potions position needing filling for the upcoming year, and that Draco should consider inquiring.

Draco didn't know what to think of that, had never really *thought* about something like that, before. Hermione simply smiled at him, didn't disagree with Neville's assessment, and led them into the living room.

Sinking onto a large sofa, Draco set his plate on his knee just as Hermione turned to him. Potter and Weasley walked into the room, throwing a knowing sort of look their way.

"I might have forbidden Molly from interrogating you. But the boys insisted."

"Please tell me that was a very poorly executed attempt at a joke," he said, glancing over at an approaching bespectacled menace and his ginger sidekick. Draco looked down at his slice of cake. *Well fuck.*

Potter sank down onto the sofa next to Draco. Weasley followed suit on Hermione's other side. A snug fit, the four of them. Hermione leaned in, whispering quiet words in his ear.

"Please remember that I love you, and I really couldn't stop them, and I honestly think this will be good for the three of you."

Draco turned his head, nose brushing up against her cheek. “You’re a beautiful, terrible traitor.”

She laughed, placing a hand on his chest for a moment as she looked torn, chewing at the inside of her lip. Slowly, she stood, took one large step away from the sofa, and then several more in rapid succession until she slipped out into the corridor.

Weasley rose enough to scoot into the space she’d formerly occupied, leaving Draco rather distastefully sandwiched and abandoned. Weasley blew out a breath, fingers drumming on his knee.

“Ginny was looking for Hermione.”

“I’m sure she was,” Draco said. “This is it, then?”

“Seems necessary,” Potter said.

“Is it, though?”

From Weasley, “She was depressed for months.”

“It was rather unfortunately mutual, if you must know.”

From his periphery, Draco saw Potter’s face screw up: mouth and nose and brows all fighting to form some kind of unknowable expression. Potter continued to stare straight ahead when he spoke again. “Well, we just wanted to make sure that it’s not going to happen again.”

“It’s not.”

On Draco’s right, he felt—and saw, just a touch in his peripheral vision—Weasley turn towards him. Potter did the same, a smile inexplicably planted on his face.

“You’ve got a rotten poker face, Potter. How do you perform your duties as an Auror with a shit-eating grin like that?”

Weasley sighed and slapped Draco on the shoulder with far more familiarity than he’d earned.

“She’s already made us promise not to be *too* hard on you,” he said.

Draco snorted before he could withhold the derision.

Potter pushed his stupid glasses up. If he’d just get a pair that fit properly, he wouldn’t have to touch them all the fucking time. Draco

resolved to convince Hermione to get him new glasses for Christmas.

“Look, we’ve accepted it, alright? We’re pretty much stuck with you, yeah?”

Potter’s words were a strange echo, bridging memory and time and conversations long since concluded between completely different parties. He’d heard that before, when Hermione had said it about his parents. He’d been hopeful, then, struck by the implied permanence in her words. Now, that permanence didn’t have the same novelty. It had become a fact. But that it could be acknowledged so freely, and by the likes of Harry Potter, debilitated Draco for a moment.

“Yes,” he finally said. “Unfortunately, we are stuck together.”

“Don’t look so put out about it, Malfoy. We’re fun,” Potter said, smiling again, annoying again. Draco indulged in an eye roll. “You like my wife, at least.”

“And Lav says your tea leaves are always interesting.” Draco didn’t so much appreciate Weasley’s input.

“I know you like Quidditch,” Potter continued. “We could try playing sometime.”

Draco found he’d much prefer lancing boils off the victims of gruesome potions accidents.

Weasley clapped him on the shoulder again. “I’m not even going to *try* to convince you to like me,” he said. “That should count for something.”

Oddly, it did.

He looked up to find Ginny and Hermione standing in the doorway, both failing to suppress smiles. Something about his face must have tipped them over the edge, because when Draco made eye contact with Hermione, she doubled over in laughter. At the same moment, one of the other gingers—George—snapped a photograph from behind Hermione, forever cementing in history an image of Draco stuck on a sofa between Harry Potter and Ronald Weasley.

He’d have that photo burned. Camera dissolved in an acid potion. And if obliviation wasn’t such a sore subject with Hermione, he’d probably have the lot of them forget this day ever happened.

As it stood, Draco could do none of those things. Not if he wanted to keep watching Hermione laugh so freely, clutching Ginny for support, and wiping the happiest sort of tears from the corners of her eyes.

Chapter End Notes

all the love to [Endless_musings](#), and [persephone_stone](#)!

thank you everyone so much for reading! i hope you're enjoying our daily chapter extravaganza! four more days to go! can you believe it?!

Chapter 45: +.333, +.333, +.333

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

September

Draco found Theo leaning against the enormous stone walls that made up Gringott's gleaming white exterior. Draco appreciated timelines, generally abided by them to a fastidious, almost obsessive degree. But he'd had trouble pulling himself away from Hermione at the Floo that morning. Nor did he have a good reason for his struggle to disentangle himself, quite literally, from her hair.

She had plans to meet her parents for lunch. He would have attended if he hadn't made this appointment with Theo two weeks prior. Something about saying goodbye to Hermione on a weekend, the time *they* usually spent together, had him holding on a little tighter. Threading his fingers through her curls, coiling them around his knuckles, tugging just enough to angle her mouth to his.

Objectively speaking, if one were keeping track of time and timeliness, one might say he kissed her for too long, crowding her against the fireplace and losing himself in the warm, lustful fog that descended like a summer squall whenever his mouth found her skin. He found it difficult not to lose himself in the wonderful, glorious ease that living with her again, having her again, brought him.

Before hadn't been bad, not by any stretch of the imagination. But only with the benefit of hindsight could Draco see the things that had been hanging over them: his parents' prejudices, her concerns about professionalism, the topics they avoided in an attempt to protect each other. But now, *after*, certainty silenced all that doubt. They'd picked, the two of them. Decided. They agreed, decisions in his and hers, that they were willing to pay what must be paid to have their happiness together. And sometimes that cost came in the form of extended kissing when one had other places to be. Other times, it came in the form of late night conversations about the things they expected of each other, needed from each other, and asked of each other. The kissing was enjoyable, but the conversation necessary.

He'd detached himself with just enough time for her to hop through the Floo to her parents' newly connected fireplace, perfectly on time, though not several minutes early as she'd planned.

Draco, on the other hand, had to Floo to the Leaky and then walk at a sensible pace down Diagon Alley in order to meet with Theo.

He opened his mouth to offer some kind of excuse, only to have Theo cut him off.

"I really don't want to know why you're late," he said, before turning to the doors. He paused, a half twist back to Draco. He tilted his head just enough to indicate he intended to point with his posture. "She's mussed your hair, mate."

Theo *almost* looked amused as he pushed open golden doors and entered the bank.

"Not off to teach youngsters this year, I take it?" Theo asked as he handed over his wand and coordinated a trip to his vault.

Draco snorted. "Hardly. My inquiry about the open position was summarily rejected. Apparently they've temporarily filled the position for the year."

Theo shrugged, accepted his wand, and followed the Goblin to the vault carts. "There's always next year," he said. He made a grand, sweeping sort of gesture, inviting Draco into the cart first.

Draco folded himself into it. "Seems doubtful. Though I was rather blandly recommended to apply in full next March when they're accepting applications again."

Theo sat next to him, another question, or comment, or something utterly exhausting but likely entirely well-meaning about to spill from his mouth.

"Let's not talk about my employment failures." He cringed, regretting the words as soon as he'd spoken them. He risked a glance at Theo: perpetually and eternally unemployed, it seemed.

"Oh, don't feel bad. I've stopped trying. I've decided to call myself an inventor. Gets people to stop asking and it isn't exactly wrong."

The cart lurched into motion.

“You’re definitely an inventor.”

Theo shrugged.

Several minutes later, their cart came to a screeching, unpleasant halt at the Nott family vaults. A bit unsteady as he rose, Draco allowed himself a deep, nervous breath as the Goblin accompanying them unlocked and opened the vault.

“Thank you,” he said to Theo’s back, standing a bit behind him. Theo turned. “For this. Thank you, Theo.”

Theo just grinned. A huge, full-face consuming kind of grin. “I literally cannot think of a single better use for any of the junk I have laying around these vaults.”

Draco followed Theo inside. The Nott heirloom vault looked similar to the Malfoy one. Of course, the Malfoy vault took several more minutes to reach, deeper in the Giggotts’s cave system. But generally speaking, one vault crammed to bursting with jewelry, priceless artifacts, and rare art looked very similar to the next.

Despite the gray stone walls and the darkness trying to creep in from the caves, the whole space had a warm, yellowing glow about it: from the sconces to the glints of gold to the gratitude shining behind Draco’s ribs. It all felt very warm.

“This way,” Theo said, leading Draco towards the back of the vault. “We don’t have a great deal of jewelry, but I swear I saw some—ah, yes. Here we are.”

Draco joined Theo in front of a tray of rings in all variety of size, cut, color, and obscenity of price and historical value. Theo waved his wand and a fine, golden handwriting scrawled to life above each piece, only adding to the gilded splendor around them.

“So. They’re tagged by century of acquisition, last known owner, etcetera, etcetera, etcetera. My great grandmother Cecilia apparently enjoyed organizing and cataloguing the family jewels.”

Draco lifted his brows, simultaneously impressed and amused.

“Not a euphemism, I swear,” Theo said, smiling all the same.

Draco stood, staring at the rings for several minutes, long enough that Theo began shifting in place, weight transferring from foot to foot.

Finally, tentatively, Draco gave into his impulse towards the first one that caught his eye. A gold band with an oval shaped ruby surrounded by an orbit of tiny diamonds. He picked it up, examining it.

“I was sort of hoping you’d pick that one. A bit of Gryffindor for her, yeah?”

Draco sighed.

“I’ve tried giving her rubies before. It did not go well.”

Theo’s head tilted. “Well, I suppose that’s fair. But aren’t you two *living your lives to the fullest* now, past be damned? I assume that’s what all the sex is about, judging by how often your Floo is locked.” Theo gestured to the ring. “I think that one is perfect for her. But if you want something more—classic? There are some diamonds.”

Draco looked back down at the other rings. “The diamonds are all rather—ostentatious. She’d never want something that big.”

“What about the sapphire, then? But that does feel like an ode to Ravenclaw, and while Granger is definitely the smartest person I know—no offense—she’s still a Gryffindor.”

“I got over her being smarter than me in the mid-90’s.”

“That’s good. Best not be holding grudges against your future wife.”

The word wife hit Draco square in the chest. His diaphragm seized, breath halted for the several seconds it took to reconcile that such a word had not been spoken in jest. But rather, it represented a very real, very likely future state in his life.

He looked down at the ruby ring again, still poised between his thumb and forefinger. He tried to picture it, imagine it. On her hand, nails dragging down his forearms, cradling a child’s head, holding his hand, answering owls from Hogwarts. He liked what he imagined. It drew him in, a happy dream, a potential reality.

And strangely, it almost felt like a new opportunity. A chance to do jewelry right, a chance to succeed this time, where before he’d very much failed. More than that, the ring spoke to her tastes, too. The others were all too big and too gaudy and too offensively garish. She would hate them. But this ruby: it was smaller, understated, beautiful.

Theo must have seen his decision crystalizing, because he clapped his

hands together, grinning that wide, foolish grin again.

He plucked the ring from Draco's fingers.

"I'll have any lingering wards or curses broken from it by the end of the day."

Draco's eyes widened, then neutralized. It shouldn't have been surprising information that Nott jewelry might be just as cursed as the sort available in the Malfoy vaults.

"When are you doing it?" Theo asked.

"Her birthday, I think. I'm finally going to take her to Italy. We've—never successfully made it there."

Theo sucked in his cheeks, head tilting. "And the wedding?"

"I don't—I don't know, Theo. Do you think we could get engaged first?"

"Just trying to figure out my timelines."

"Your—what? Timelines for what?"

Theo's grin shifted, more of a smirk, definitely something knowing, almost teasing. He lifted a brow, casually leaning against a suit of armor. It shifted slightly under his weight, but held. He popped the ring onto his pinky finger, teeth flashing as his smile broke again.

"Oh nothing—just a little something Blaise said." Theo waved his hand, dismissive. "All off-hand and ominous like he does sometimes."

Draco didn't know what to think of that. "Ok?"

"I can't decide if I should go to the Ministry or not."

"Excuse me?"

Ominous, indeed. Tension pulled his muscle fibers together, preparing Draco for bad news, or at the very least, something startling. Theo had a habit of dropping unusual, unexpected information on him at inopportune moments.

"I should probably just apply for a bonding license by post. I feel like they'd be more likely to approve—or at least not stall my processing—if they don't have to see my face. I'll have to brush up on the magic

involved. I'm sure I have a book on marriage ceremonies in my library."

Draco's head spun, repeating the phrase *marriage ceremony* over and over and over again inside his skull.

"Shame I look just like my father, isn't it?" Theo continued, entirely unfazed by what he'd just said. "But you know all about that. Spitting image of Lucius, you are. Not enough to metaphorically bear their burdens, is it?"

Draco found his voice, pulled it from a tangled place at the base of his throat. "Could we back up for a moment? Bonding license?"

"Mmhmm."

"For our—are you planning on marrying us? Did Blaise say—"

"Of course Blaise didn't say. He never says. Never says much of anything, does he? Great prat. But there were implications, subtext between the two of us, if you will."

Draco snorted, inappropriately amused.

Theo lifted his pinky, ruby glinting in the warm light inside the vault.

"So, I'll make sure this is clean and then you'll be in the clear to propose to that witch of yours."

Draco grinned this time, matching Theo's ridiculous enthusiasm with his own.

"I'm going to hug you now," Theo announced.

Draco barely managed a faux roll of his eyes. "Must you?"

"Absolutely. My best friend is happy again and he's going to get the girl. Seems hug-worthy, don't you think?"

"You're so sentimental," Draco said as Theo pulled him into a genuine, heartfelt sort of hug that spoke to decades of friendship, of more history than they could navigate individually.

"No, mate. That's you."

Draco's frown only lasted a second, wrangled back into a smile by Theo's joy.

Hermione called to him from their bathroom. She'd spent the last half an hour doing far more primping and styling than her norm. "Are you *really* not going to tell me what we're doing for my birthday?"

She'd already asked him twice. He declined each time. He twirled his wand between his fingers, waiting idly in his chair at the kitchen table.

"No," he said, barely having to lift his voice to travel between them in their tiny flat. "I'm not. It's a surprise." He heard her groan, muffled between drywall and timber and paint. "I know you don't care for surprises, *big* surprises at that. But we're celebrating your birthday in style this year and you can't stop me."

She stepped into the corridor with a snort.

"You're a petulant prat, you know that? It's my birthday. Shouldn't *I* get what *I* want?"

"I haven't been able to give you everything I've wanted to give you. Please let me spoil you, just a bit. Just for your birthday."

"Is that wise?" She stepped forward, evidently finished with her preparations. "Doing something—bigger? What with adjusting to our new financial situation, and all?"

Draco's jaw tensed. He forced away the irritation, the annoyance, the subtle pang of embarrassment that flooded his veins. She'd prodded a fresh wound—gently, but a prod nevertheless.

He rallied, finding a smirk and planting it firmly on his face.

"I have wealthy friends."

"My birthday requires wealthy friends?"

"This one does."

She made a tiny, whining groan in the back of her throat.

"Am I dressed appropriately for something like that?"

She was. A navy dress he'd never seen before, probably another new addition from the 'Pansy redoes Hermione's wardrobe' project. It skimmed her hips and fell just above her knees.

She looked absolutely stunning.

"You look beautiful. Perfect. And I'm already wearing gray, so we'll look well-matched together."

"Well-matched? You sound so unforgivably posh when you say things like that."

"They can take away my money, but the habits remain."

It felt easier when he prodded the wound himself. A familiar pain he might desensitize himself to.

She reached a hand to the back of her hair, isolating a curl that spiraled away from a low bun. Her lips pursed as she tackled it, trying to force it in with the rest of her hair.

Draco could feel her nerves, radiating in tight actions and strained features, more than unease over a surprise. She had to know. Or have some kind of idea. They'd agreed on it, after all. Admittedly, he'd been buried in her cunt and kissing praises across her collarbone at the time, but they both knew—she knew—that he would propose. And soon.

He held up an ornate silver key. A portkey, specifically.

She paused in the battle with her hair, rolling her eyes as she realized what he held. Her hands fell from her hair as a smile finally forced its way onto her face, acceptance, perhaps, that he planned to give her one night of extravagance. If ever there were an occasion, this was it.

She reached for his hand as Draco activated the portkey, letting Theo's gentle, improved version of the device spin them away. And when they landed, he held her closer, hands winding in her hair, releasing it from its binds. It spiraled outward the instant he freed it.

"Stop fighting it," he whispered. "It's beautiful."

And even as the humidity in an unusually warm Italian September inflated her curls, he truly believed his own words. He loved it. Loved her.

She looked around the room they'd landed in.

"Are we in a winery?" she asked.

"Yes."

A pause.

"It's—empty?"

"We have the place to ourselves."

He placed a hand at her lower back, fingers acting as tiny pressure points bracketing her spine. He steered her towards a large window overlooking the rows of trellised vines on the hill below.

"It's beautiful," she breathed. Then, she turned. "Are we—where are we?"

His answer came out a touch more sly this time, unable to restrain how pleased he was with himself.

"At a winery, as I've just said."

Hermione's hands found her hips. She narrowed her eyes, mouth tight, expression holding for a beat. Then, a cautious amusement peeked through. He assumed she meant to look serious; she only looked kissable.

"What country are we in?"

"Italy." He grinned as he said it, placed his hands on her shoulders, and turned her towards the window again, encouraging her to take it in. He watched her eyes widen, smile growing, apples of her cheeks rounding as she exhaled.

"I've always wanted to see Italy."

"I know. That's why we're here."

She turned back to him. "Draco, it's a Monday. Don't you think international dinner plans are a bit much for a weekday? Even when it's my birthday?"

He laughed. The fact that he'd expected her to bring this up, and beautifully, predictably, she had, fluttered fond amusement deep in his stomach.

“Not when you have the whole week off, it isn’t.”

She frowned, forehead creasing as her brows bunched together.

“I voluntarily schemed with Potter to put in a time off request for you at the Ministry. Which, by the way, you took three weeks off for your parents earlier this year and you *still* have far too much holiday accrued. We’re vacationing more, I’ve decided.”

Her jaw hinged open, closed, then open again. “That was...very presumptuous of you.”

“Yes, I know. And I knew that might annoy you a bit. *But*, I’m also presuming this evening is going to go well. And then tomorrow, I’m taking you on a tour of the country. Wineries, restaurants, museums: all the art and history and fine dining your heart can handle.”

As expected, her indignation, her tiny swell of annoyance, melted with each promised activity, aimed directly at a holiday wishlist she’d shared with him on more than one occasion. She still looked a touch annoyed, but she looked excited, too.

“Draco, this is—a lot. Probably too much.”

“Not for you.” He found her hand, pulled it to his lips, kissed her knuckles. “Never for you. It’s all planned out. Theo has prepared our portkeys, Blaise owns several of the wineries we’re visiting—this one included—and Pansy stocked your tiny beaded monstrosity with a week’s worth of outfits.”

“Crookshanks?”

Draco couldn’t decide if he ought to laugh or be offended that she felt compelled to ask. He chose to laugh; he chose lightness. With her, he would always choose lightness.

“Theo is overjoyed by the idea of cat-sitting,” he said. “Hermione. I’m not a beggar. I run a business. I still have *some* connections. Let me spoil you. For this, please let me spoil you.”

She turned to him more fully, winding her arms around the back of his neck, fingers anchoring her at his nape. She rolled her lips between her teeth, a pause as she thought.

“And what is this, exactly?”

“Your birthday.”

“That’s it?”

He leaned down, kissed her, poured every ounce of himself into it. “Not even close,” he whispered in the tiny spaces between their lips. He pulled back and reached for her arms, detaching her grip around his neck. He led her away from the window, through the winery, and to a large, vaulted room with walls lined in enormous oak barrels from floor to ceiling.

Candles floated throughout the room, a table set for two in the center.

Supremely pleased with himself, Draco savored the breathy noise she made, knowing he’d quite literally stolen her breath. He led her towards the table; her clammy grip in his hand tightened with each step.

When he turned to her, he could see her nerves: a jittery sort of anticipation that would prevent her from truly enjoying their setting. Instead, her gaze darted around the room, taking in every detail, but with a sort of critical analysis, void of enjoyment.

Hermione Granger, generally level-headed, especially in a crisis, looked utterly debilitated by a romantic dinner.

He pulled her to him by their still-entwined hands, disentangled their fingers, and held her close, breathing against her hair. He smiled into her curls, trying to offer her comfort, confidence. “Relax, Hermione. This is going to be a perfect evening.”

He could feel her breathing, tight and forced, expanding and contracting her ribs against his. “I don’t know why I’m so nervous.” She said it in barely a whisper, low and slow, words melting from her mouth like candle wax.

“Of course you know.”

She tensed, a line from her fingers against his waist, up her arms, and across her shoulders. She rolled them back, trying to force that tight posture away.

She knew what was coming. And if Draco admitted it to himself, his whole body felt coiled tight, tension barely containing nerves of his own. He kept thinking, treacherously, traitorously, of how he’d never

successfully given her jewelry before. What with the disastrous ruby necklace and the doomed ring in his valet box.

This ring though, the one in his pocket, it came from Theo's vaults. This ring had none of the Malfoy tarnish on it.

He pulled away from her hair and leaned in, holding his face close to hers, begging for eye contact when she seemed much more interested in divining the thread count of his cotton oxford. Lined up, bodies held close together, he almost felt like he might be dancing with her: a silent, motionless dance, just the two of them.

"I want you to enjoy our dinner," he said.

"I do too."

"I don't want you to be nervous, Granger."

That rattled her breathing. He'd done it on purpose, slipped into using her last name. Her front teeth sank into her bottom lip, a flush of pink and white as she held it there, held her breath.

He'd been planning on doing it during dessert, after a beautiful meal. But he didn't want her to suffer these nerves if she didn't have to, especially if she already knew. At a certain point, it only felt like prolonging the inevitable. Something about the simplicity of this moment, standing so close, not quite dancing, it felt right.

His dipped his head forward, just enough to skim past her cheek, to find her ear.

"Say you'll marry me." He unlocked her hands from their grip around his waist, reached into his pocket, and pulled out a velvet ring box. He put a cautious amount of space between them, enough to look at her directly, to make his intentions crystal, undeniably clear. "I said I'd give you more jewelry one day, *eventually*. Of all the jewelry I've ever tried to give, or thought about giving you, this is the one I hope you'll accept the most."

With his own nerves wound tight around his spine, Draco dropped to his knee. He took a fortifying breath, and restated it as an actual question.

"Will you marry me, Hermione?"

He'd expected her to cry; she usually did when her emotions

overwhelmed her. Tears normally yielded annoyance, frustration over a thing she had little control over, furiously swiping at the offensive little things pouring down her face. But this time, she made no move to wipe them.

Judging from the quaffle-sized ball in the center of Draco's chest, he had to concur that there was something extremely, wildly overwhelming about their present circumstances. She reached for his wrist, pulling him to his feet. He'd barely straightened when she buried her face in his chest, arms wrapped around his torso.

Draco couldn't shake the buzzing in his ears, the pounding of his own pulse thrumming beneath his skin. The room around him seemed to roar with a wild, white noise that ignited his nerves, still ricocheting around his nervous system.

The roar dulled, tension finally subsiding, when he realized she was saying something against his chest, a little chant of *yes yes yes* he'd nearly missed.

They were quiet agreements at first, then louder, propelled by a wave of overwhelmed tears, then quieter again. She gathered herself, pulled her head back to look up at him, then immediately dropped her forehead against his sternum again.

"I didn't mean to make us wait so long."

"That's—not your fault. Hermione. You were right. We weren't ready." He lifted his hand, placed his forefinger beneath her chin, guiding her to look up at him. "For as ready as I thought we—I—was, I was still straddling two worlds."

He kissed her forehead, feeling something warm and soothing collapse inside his chest. It had fought for so long; now, it took its rest.

He led her to their seats, pulling his around the table so that he could sit directly across from her, face to face, without so much as a dinner table to obscure his meaning. "When I was my maddest at you, my most upset, I would think about how I'd always picked you and you never really picked me. But that—gods, Hermione, that was so unfair of me, because by the end of last year it was just the opposite, wasn't it? You'd picked me entirely. And you were just waiting on me to pick you. And I'm sorry it took me so long that I didn't even realize I was doing it. I thought I'd already decided."

She nodded, finally wiping away some of her tears. "I know. We don't

need to rehash this, not again, not right now.” She reached out to brush his hair from where it had slipped from its charms, falling over his forehead. “I love you. I picked you, too. I want to marry you.” Her voice failed, choked. “Can I see the ring?”

It seemed appropriate, in retrospect, that he’d fumbled something. Too perfect and it wouldn’t have felt real. He’d never even opened the box.

His laughter came out as a groan, bordering on embarrassment. “Yes, of course.” He cracked it open. “It’s not a Malfoy heirloom, I promise.”

She smiled, a touch wry and disbelieving, as she examined the ring he’d picked for her. “It certainly *looks* like an heirloom. It’s beautiful.”

“Oh, it *is* an heirloom.”

She blinked, gaze shifting from the jewelry box in his hands to the mischievousness he knew hid in his growing smirk.

“It’s from the Nott estate,” he said.

“Theo?”

“He’s given it to us.”

He watched it happen, this time. Emotions winding their way across her face, finding a place behind her eyes, welling with new tears, equally overwhelmed.

“What did we ever do to deserve Theo?”

“Honestly, I don’t know. I tortured him with peacocks as a kid. And yet, here we are.”

She laughed and the dam broke. Her tears spilled again, but she smiled, so happy, so beautiful. The tension around them melted.

Draco pulled the ring from the box, setting its velvet cage on the table. He reached for her hands, watching her smile grow, her fingers a bit shaky. He ran his thumb down the back of her hand, over her knuckles, down the length of her ring finger.

“May I?”

She nodded, eyes fixed on the ring in his other hand. Between the flickering candlelight, the dreamlike setting in a winery reserved just for them, and the beautiful woman allowing him to slip a ring onto

her finger, Draco barely believed his own circumstances. Unreal, impossible. As if this life couldn't be his, couldn't belong to him.

"Oh my gods," she breathed, surging forward to kiss him.

He could feel it. In a single kiss, the promise of a lifetime. And it was all worth it. Every last drop of pain and torture and uncertainty that brought him to that point. He'd do it all again, he'd spend those months miserable if it meant he ended up right back here, with her lips pressed to his, powered by the promise of forever.

When they broke apart, her hands on either side of his face, holding him there with her, she smiled, a bubble of laughter breaking through.

"I think I can enjoy our dinner now."

He kissed her again, not quite ready to relinquish the moment. But when he finally did, lungs burning, he smiled, too. "Good. We have authentic *zuca di flora* to enjoy."

And they did. Candlelight danced across her face again, one of his favorite sights. Whether over a meal in an Italian restaurant or in Italy itself, she looked beautiful. She looked like she'd promised to be his.

—

Returning to their flat after a week dining, and lazing, and fucking their way across Italy, the cramped space felt too cold, too dreary for the warm sunlight brimming between them. Draco genuinely thought he'd gotten an idea of what domestic bliss entailed; he'd had no idea. Now, though, after a week with nothing but Hermione and delicious foods and wines and sights, he had no doubt he'd finally discovered the meaning of that phrase.

He was disgustingly happy, truth be told. Theo would retch if he knew. Blaise would probably roll his eyes. Pansy might smack him, while looking reluctantly happy for him in an angry-Pansy sort of way.

Their flat felt very much the same, but also, so very different.

Hermione sank onto their green sofa, and he with her, wedging himself beside her as they lay together, inexplicably exhausted after such a relaxing week.

“Real life,” she said on a sigh.

He hummed an agreement, or perhaps just an acknowledgement, into a patch of skin on her neck, nuzzled close and dangerously tempted to taste it.

“We’re getting married?” she asked, voice quiet and wispy and barely there.

“Not a question. You’ve already agreed. I’m not letting you out of it.” As if in proof, he tightened his arms around her midsection, hostage to a hug. She rolled her eyes, smiling.

“We’re getting married.” Not a question, that time. She touched his cheek lightly, two fingers, pressed and released. “You’re a bit sunburned.”

“Not all of us can tan as beautifully as you do. Some of us have very fragile, very fair skin.”

“Poor fair baby.”

“Your ongoing inability to sympathize with my circumstances is astounding.”

Her smile only grew. He watched it reach the apples of her cheeks, teeth bright and white and gleaming at him. Her fingers twisted in the hair at the nape of his neck, sending a shiver shooting straight down his spine.

A cloud overtook her expression, nervousness peeking through. He thought he’d banished that look from her face back at the winery.

“What’s wrong?”

She searched his face before she answered. Dread grew in the pit of his stomach. Finally, quietly, “I’m excited to tell my parents”—then faster, a rush—“but I don’t want that to—hurt you.”

That was all? He sighed, resigned. It did hurt, quite a lot, actually. Quite a lot more than he wanted it to. But he’d chosen it, so he shoved the hurt away. She deserved excitement, happiness with the family

she'd put so much work into protecting, into pulling back together.

"Mine would never have been happy for us."

Her tight lips and look of pity grated on long-present nerves that wanted no such thing, not from anyone, not even her. He let it go, let it pass.

"Mine adore you. I didn't tell them much, about why we...weren't. When we weren't. I think they knew it hurt too much. But they're quite pleased you're back in my life."

A bolt of worry shot through him.

"They won't be offended, will they? That I didn't ask their permission for your hand?"

Draco didn't often get the chance to hear Hermione snicker, but she did, just then. As if the worry he'd expressed had been both hilarious and ridiculous.

"You're just flouting traditions left and right, aren't you?"

"This one was for you. You're your own woman, Granger. I know you don't need—or want—permission from anyone to do anything."

"Granger, is it? Granger-Malfoy soon, I suppose." Her grin shone like the Italian sun.

He buried his face in her neck, peppering tiny kisses on every inch of skin he traversed. She knew him too well, saw his diversionary tactic for what it was.

"Don't tell me you're surprised I don't want to drop my name entirely."

He laughed into her skin. "I'm not." He pulled back, looking at her. "Perhaps a touch disappointed."

"Hyphenation is a nice compromise, I think. I've already built a career as Granger, you know. Hyphenation will make it easier for people to re-learn my name."

He accepted her logic. He didn't mind, not really, not enough. "No one is forgetting your name, Granger. No matter what it is."

Chapter End Notes

i cannot thank [Endless_musings](#) and [persephone_stone](#) enough for their help with this story!

thank you everyone so much for reading! we've been waiting for this one! i certainly hope it was worth the wait!! three days to go!! woo!

Chapter 46: +.416, +.416, +.416

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

October

If Astoria's wedding had anything going for it, the seating arrangement at the reception was probably Draco's favorite part. Too often, society weddings liked to place entire families together, making for a boring, isolated experience for any young person wanting to escape their parents' clutches and indulge in a little too much expensive, complimentary wine. Not that Draco would have had a problem if that sort of seating arrangement had been enforced; his parents were not in attendance.

As it stood, Astoria had curated tables of acquaintances, placing Draco and Hermione with Theo, Blaise, Pansy, and Pansy's date: a rather tall, dark, dour looking fellow whose name Draco remembered long enough to repeat back to him in greeting and immediately purge from his memory.

Draco relaxed against his chair, pleasantly full from a delicious meal. He let his arm drape across the back of Hermione's chair, fingers grazing her back, shoulders, and arms ever-so-casually, every-so-often. He felt her tense and shiver each time. It was her own fault, though, wearing a beautiful silver gown that nearly robbed him of the ability to process complex thought.

She twisted in her seat beside him, hand pressing against her ribs.

"Uncomfortable?" he asked, dipping his head to deliver the words quietly, to her alone.

"It's very snug."

"I know I've said it—"

"—several—"

"—yes, several times. But you look gorgeous."

“That’s all fine and well. But, it’s definitely too tight at my waist. I told Pansy I wasn’t interested in spending a fortune on a new wardrobe so she keeps having her own pieces tailored for me.”

“Come to think of it, that *does* look like something Pans would wear.”

“I’ve informed her of my measurements on more than one occasion and yet, they keep coming to me just a touch more snug than I would prefer.”

A smile stole his expression, followed by a small laugh. “How very Slytherin of her. I do imagine the difference is by design.”

Hermione shot him a severely unamused frown. “Well. It’s unpleasantly tight.”

“I don’t want you to be uncomfortable,” he said, truly meaning it.

“But? It sounded like there was meant to be a but there.” She settled the angle of her head and jaw into a demanding sort of tilt.

Honesty gushed out of him on low, appreciative breath. “You look extraordinary.”

She rolled her eyes. “Do you know she told me what undergarments to wear as well? You should see what I have on under this.” She sipped her wine such that Draco *almost* missed the devious little smirk pulling at the corners of her mouth.

He leaned closer, just brushing against her ear. “I plan to. Perhaps you have, too. Is it in that blasted planner of yours? *Show Draco the scandalous lingerie Pansy made me wear?*”

This time, he saw her smirk break over the rim of her wine glass as she held his gaze: a challenge, confirmation, or perhaps a suggestion that he might soon find out for himself.

From Hermione’s other side, Pansy interrupted.

“Quit flirting, you two, we have things to discuss. We’re in agreement, yes? An autumn wedding: entirely unfavorable.”

Hermione put her glass down, angling her body into a neutral position facing the table. Draco hadn’t even noticed she’d turned to him, giving him her undivided attention. Pansy continued, unrepentant in her interruption.

“You’d prefer something spring or summer, yes Granger?”

The blush bloomed almost instantaneously, springtime in her skin to match Pansy’s suggestion.

They hadn’t talked much about their plans. It had only been a couple of weeks, after all. And that scant time had felt like something of a dream: happy conversations with their friends, with her family, informing those most important to them that they were officially engaged. But they hadn’t gotten anywhere close to picking dates. Hadn’t considered any concrete plans.

“I don’t know yet, Pansy. Draco and I haven’t—”

“Oh no, who cares what Draco thinks. Your wedding is about you. And you agree, don’t you? That an autumn wedding is just—not ideal unless you’re on a timeline.” She arched a brow, gaze drifting from Hermione, to Draco, and back again. “For example, if you’re expecting. You’re not expecting, are you, Granger?”

Draco watched that fine blush creep further up the side of Hermione’s neck.

“What? No—Pansy. I’m literally drinking wine right in front of you.”

Pansy just shrugged.

“So that’s a no?” This time, Pansy’s gaze darted to Hermione’s stomach. “The dress is fitting rather tight.”

“Yes, because *you* keep ignoring my actual measurements.” Hermione’s voice crept higher, pitching enough that Theo and Blaise looked up from their conversation across the table. Hermione took a deep breath. “No Pansy, I am not pregnant.” The straightforward clarity of such a statement seemed necessary, Draco agreed. Pansy could twist even the slightest misunderstanding or omissions into much, much larger things. “Furthermore,” Hermione went on. “I think you’re all being rather presumptuous about Astoria.”

Pansy snorted, undignified, and exactly one of the reasons why Draco liked her so much. “Granger, have you looked at Astoria’s dress? That empire waistline? She is definitely pregnant.”

Hermione shook her head, exhaling as she reached for her wine again. Pansy did tend to instill a want for libations.

“Let’s start with flowers,” Pansy said. “If we want them fresh—which, of course, we do—it’ll help pin down our preferred seasonality for the wedding. What are your favorites?”

Despite the wine glass, heavily tilted as Hermione sipped—gulped?—Draco still saw her increasing stress under Pansy’s interrogation. He might have helped, cut in or redirected the conversation, had Astoria not tapped him on the shoulder at that same moment, asking if he could walk with her.

He rose from his seat, offering an apologetic look to Hermione. Though, he didn’t feel *too* bad about leaving her in Pansy’s clutches. After all, Hermione delivered him to Potter and Weasley and then abandoned him there not so long ago. If anything, this was a fair bit of retribution. He hid his smirk with a kiss to her cheek before he departed, offering an arm to the woman he’d once been contracted to marry.

—

Astoria recommended the gardens, a slow walk as he escorted her through the blooming irises, lilies, and delphiniums. Strangely, he’d never been more comfortable in her presence.

“I wanted to thank you,” she said, bringing them to a stop amidst the chrysanthemums. Draco assumed he was meant to say something, anything in response, but found his words lacking. “I was going to go through with it,” she continued. “I was hoping you’d love me one day. Maybe you could have, too. But—this is better. Much better.”

“I should be thanking you,” Draco said, finding his words in the form of true, bone-deep gratitude. “Whatever you said to your father—he was the one who cancelled the contract. Lucius would have forced us to marry whether we wanted to or not.”

“I know. I upset my parents quite a lot by refusing to invite them—your parents, that is.” She reached to the back of her head, smoothing her perfect, dark hair. Such an action had once felt so cold, so forced to him. It didn’t bring the same bother it once had, not now. “I’ve obviously heard about the disinheritance and, well, I thought I owed you a thanks and an invitation much more than I did them.”

“I’m sorry you’ve upset your parents for me.” And for the first time, Draco experienced the tiniest blip of understanding, an infinitesimal fraction of what Hermione must have felt, watching his relationship with his parents disintegrate, in large part, over her.

Astoria laughed. It wasn’t a titter, but something truly, genuinely amused: teeth gleaming, eyes sparkling. She should always laugh like that. She should lock up that society laugh of hers and never let it see the light of day again. This laugh was so, so much better.

“It’s alright,” she said. She placed a hand at the seam of her dress beneath the bust, running it down the front and smoothing the fabric to reveal a small, but noticeable bump. “In the grand scheme of things, it was one of the smaller issues they had to come to terms with.”

Draco smiled. “I had assumed. Congratulations.”

“I’m sure most have. And thank you.”

“You’re happy?” He couldn’t explain why, but it felt so undeniably important to him that she was.

“I am. And you?”

“I am.”

“We might have done alright together,” she said. “But I’m so glad we got to choose.”

Draco smiled again, an unexpected tension unwinding from the center of his chest. “Me too.”

“And honestly, I’m thrilled I don’t have to name my children after constellations. Something simple, I think.” She held her hand to her stomach a moment longer, presumably lost in a future that blessedly did not involve him.

—

Hermione found them a few minutes later. She made several apologies for interrupting, which Astoria brushed off with charm and grace and unexpected warmth before she returned to her wedding festivities.

Draco offered Hermione his arm, walking her through the autumnal blooms, feeling her considerable stress melt with each step. Her grip on his arm, little pinpricks of pointed fingertips, eased as they walked.

“Interested in a repeat of the last time we were in a garden at a wedding?” he asked, memories of Harry Potter’s wedding and the Burrow’s herb garden surfacing inside his head. For a moment, he swore he smelled rosemary, a hint of sage.

Hermione smiled beside him. “I hadn’t considered it, but I can’t say I’d be opposed. It was a spectacular kiss, after all.”

“It was perfect.”

Her tension eased more. He led her to a stone bench where they could sit, relax, chat with each other in privacy. Only the faint sound of strings playing beyond the gardens accompanied them.

“Are you alright?” Draco asked as she twisted her fingers together, popping a knuckle.

“Pansy might have overloaded me.”

Draco’s throaty laugh might not have been entirely appropriate—or helpful—but it burst from him regardless.

“She does that,” he said.

“Questions about flowers and color palettes and fabric preferences and music and location and size and menu—”

“Breathe, love.” He pulled her hands into his, lifting them to his lips. “Pansy is used to a certain— *type* of wedding. And she’s inexplicably invested in, and excited about, ours.”

“Ours,” Hermione repeated. She let out a long breath, letting her shoulders and chest and lungs collapse, ridding herself of the bad air that seemed to plague her.

“Weddings like what Pansy is used to—well, they are quite a lot. And they take a long time to plan. I’m sure she has a litany of observations about how thrown together this one is.”

“Thrown together? Draco, this is the most beautiful wedding I’ve ever been to.”

“I’m sure Astoria would be very pleased to hear that. But I’m certain

it's not passed muster in Pansy's eyes."

She shook her head, as if dislodging the absurdity of such a thing from her loose curls, worn half-up, half-down, entirely beautiful.

"We don't have to figure any of this out now," he said, still holding her hand. His thumb brushed over her ring, still unused to having it there when he traced her fingers with his. "We can take however much time we'd like."

Hermione smiled, offering no further comment. Instead, she leaned in, taking a kiss from him. And it was so lovely, he forgot about all the rest.

—

"Granger, I'm impressed. A silk blouse? A skirt that *wouldn't* pass the Ministry's dress regulations? Not bad."

Pansy *said* she was impressed, but only sounded tepidly committed to such a sentiment, arms crossing as she offered her assessment of Hermione's outfit.

"You picked it out yourself?" she asked. "You didn't let Draco help, did you?"

The annoyed scoff that erupted from Hermione's throat amused Draco nearly as much as it surprised him.

"I'm not completely hapless, you know. I do *have* taste. I just don't often care to put this much effort into what I'm wearing."

"And yet," Pansy began, ushering them to follow her through Nott manor with a dramatic wave. "You're wearing that."

"I do like to feel a little dressed up every so often. And this is surprisingly comfortable." Hermione gripped Draco's hand, a familiar squeeze she often used as an outlet for her annoyance.

Pansy's smirk puckered, far too pleased. "You're welcome."

"I wasn't thanking you."

“Certainly sounded like it.”

Draco couldn't feel his fingers, but he found himself enjoying the exchange far too much to liberate his hand. Hermione gave as good as she got, sniping at Pansy with equal force and, despite the pressure cracking his joints, she almost looked like she might be enjoying herself.

Draco was certainly enjoying *himself*. Pansy and Hermione were—well, they were sort of fun to watch banter.

It was a relief, too, that Hermione didn't outright hate Pansy. Draco's friends came in a variety of different tastes, and Pansy probably took the longest to acquire. He'd never had any doubt that Hermione would get along with Theo. Theo was something of a Pinot Grigio, ridiculously easy to drink. Barely even wine: gulpable, honestly. Light and enjoyable. Blaise was more of a Pinot Noir. Easy to enjoy if one liked reds, though not necessarily as easy to swallow. But Pansy, she was a rich, full bodied Cabernet Sauvignon. She was tannic. She had grit. Best had with a meal and small sips, heavy aeration required. Evidently, Hermione seemed to enjoy a robust red.

Perhaps the challenge called to her.

As they entered what had become their de facto entertaining room every Friday night, a cavernous space with a bar and an enormous round table in the center of the room, it became clear that Pansy wasn't the only one forcing fun on them that evening. Theo bounced with just as much energy, welcoming them, ferrying drinks from Blaise's position mixing at the bar to their seats at the table.

Hermione sipped her drink, smiling through her confusion as Pansy automatically began dealing cards. Blaise delivered a selection of wines to the table as he took his own seat, picking up his cards and throwing a few galleon chips to the center of the table.

Hermione leaned into Draco, voice low against his shoulder. “What are we playing, exactly?”

“Unclear. Pansy hasn't really explained it. She wins every time, anyway.” He waved his cards at her. “I mostly pretend to play for a hand or two and then distract myself with drinking or conversation.”

The purse at Hermione's mouth didn't go unnoticed. He could see it, the thought, begging to be spoken into existence. “You just—you let her win? What if—”

Draco laughed. Of course Hermione wanted to win.

“If you can’t stomach letting Pansy rob us blind, which is probably a good decision for our finances, truth be told, you can ask her how to play. But be warned, she’s vicious.”

That warning evidently landed as a challenge. Hermione leaned away from him again, switching her focus to Pansy who, to her credit, looked overjoyed to have another party actually invested in her game.

Draco only realized he’d accepted and subsequently consumed the two shots Theo handed him after the fact, throat burning. He supposed they’d be doing *that* kind of drinking this evening, then.

“I’m telling you,” Theo said, pouring a very generous serving of scotch into Draco’s tumbler. “Aconite can be grown in sunlight with the right soil drainage.” Theo nodded as if to confirm the veracity of his own statement. “I’m certain of it. Would make for stronger wolfsbane.”

Draco took a hefty gulp of his drink, trying to banish that statement’s idiocy from his brain by way of liquor. “That’s—the stupidest thing you’ve said in a long time, Theo. Aconite is painfully temperamental. It can barely be grown in greenhouses; it does best in the wild. And the whole *point* of its use in wolfsbane is that there’s very little sunlight in the growing process—”

“The contradictory properties would—”

“You’re making this up. When was the last time you brewed?”

“Not—that long ago?” Theo tilted his head, a touch off-balance as he considered that answer.

“With aconite? Have you ever even brewed wolfsbane? It’s an exceedingly complicated potion.” If Draco really considered it, his world felt a bit wobbly. He kept sipping his drink, arguing pointless potions debates with Theo, while Pansy, Hermione, and Blaise engaged in some kind of card game. “You don’t even like potions, or herbology,” Draco concluded.

“Ah, but I like arguing.”

“You’re insane.”

“Probably a little.”

Draco glared.

Theo lifted his hands in defense. “Fine, fine. I’ll stop. You look about ten seconds from challenging me to a duel.”

“Maybe a duel would do you some good.”

Theo shrugged. “It’s possible.” He knocked back another shot. Where it came from, Draco couldn’t reliably say. But when he looked down, Draco found a shot glass of his own waiting beside his scotch.

“Oh, you know what?” Theo leaned in, dropping his voice, low and conspiratorial. “I was rooting around dear old dead dad’s offices again. I found something *really* interesting in his study.”

“Did you?”

Draco didn’t know what to expect. Theo’s definition of interesting could range from facts about muggle technology to Class A prohibited materials.

Theo dropped his voice even lower, a bit of waggle in his brows.

“You want to know what it is?”

“I suspect you’re going to tell me.” Draco dutifully downed his mysterious shot. “Would you like me to beg?”

“Save that for Granger.” A grimace. “Fine, I’ll tell you. A *time turner*.”

“A— *you found a what?*”

Theo hushed him, dramatically and immediately. He cast some very suspicious glances to either side, as if anyone was listening in. “And it’s not—well, it’s not a normal one from what I can tell. I’ve been fiddling a bit.”

“Fiddling with time turner magic.” He lowered his voice as Theo hushed him again. “That could be—that’s—wow.”

Part of Draco demanded to ask more, to know more. Merlin, part of him wanted Theo to lead the way to the study right that very instant and show him. The curiosity burned hot and sudden in the pit of his stomach. The *power* in time. The *potential*.

Hermione laughed from beside him, drawing his attention. She hauled a pile of coins from the center of the table to the space directly in

front of her. Pansy frowned; Blaise looked tentatively amused. When Hermione glanced at Draco, she laughed again and winked, *fucking winked* like the cheeky little winner she was.

Time turners were fickle, fussy things. And that fucking wink was worth far more than he was willing to risk, curiosity or not.

He turned back to Theo. “Be careful?” Phrased as a question. “Time turners are regulated for a reason.”

Theo released a forlorn sort of sigh. “I know, I know. But it is fun to experiment. Just a little fucking with the fabric of space and time.”

“Theoretically,” Draco insisted.

“Theoretically, of course.”

Draco leaned back in his chair, half-tempted to lift two legs off the floor and attempt a balance. But he didn’t have the preternatural coordination that Blaise did, especially not after several drinks. Instead, he sipped his scotch and watched Hermione play another round as she grinned with the worst sort of poker face he’d ever seen, clearly extremely pleased with her prior successes.

Pansy won that round, taking a new pile of coins from the center of the table and stacking them neatly with the rest of her winnings. When Hermione glanced at him again, he lifted his drink. He tapped the base on the table. Once, twice, three times.

She smiled and set her cards down.

He stood, offering her his hand.

“Where do you two think you’re going? The night’s just getting started.” Pansy sounded genuinely affronted, demanding an answer. “I haven’t even had a chance to make any new headway with Granger on floral arrangements.”

Hermione took his hand, standing, flush against him. He heard Theo groaning from behind them.

“Sorry, Pans. I’m stealing my fiancée away”—for a moment, his breath escaped him, lost on the unreality of the word *fiancée* —“and we’re probably going to go find ourselves somewhere private to snog for a bit.”

“Oh no,” came Theo. “Please don’t.” A retching sound, followed by Pansy’s high-pitched, surprised laugh, almost a shriek.

“Gods, are they always like this?” she asked.

Draco caught the motion from Blaise’s shrug out of the corner of his eye. “Usually,” he said.

“The more dramatic you are, Theo, the less likely I am to teach you any more about submarines,” Hermione said.

Oddly, the faux retching ceased.

They’d barely stepped into the corridor before Hermione had her hands all over him, wrapped around his torso, nails dragging down his back, lips latching onto his neck. He laughed, surrendering to the absurd, youthful sort of joy in snogging his girlfriend —*his fiancée*— just out of sight, of needing an excuse to go do so.

“Blaise has been keeping your drinks well stocked, too, I see. Always so handsy with a little alcohol in your system.”

“Mmhmm,” she hummed against his neck before pulling back. She laced her fingers with his, guiding him into the next room. It contained a few bookcases, a desk, and a chaise. With the confidence of a witch with a few drinks in her, she pulled Draco to the chaise and pushed him down onto it. A little forceful, not too much, but enough that his interest immediately piqued, pooling below his belt.

“And I’ve had the perfect amount,” she said, swinging her legs over him such that she straddled his lap, skirt riding up. Based on present evidence, he had to agree.

“Is that so? What exactly is the perfect amount?”

She kissed him, warm, sweet lips pressed against his. She sighed against his mouth, a beautiful, whimpering noise spilling from the back of her throat. She pulled just far enough away that she could speak.

“Enough that I’m considering sucking you off in one of the many, rarely-used rooms in this prestigious Manor.” She glanced around, mischievousness glinting behind her eyes as she took in the space around them. “This room could do nicely, for example. But I haven’t had so much that my fine motor skills are suffering.”

With enough alcohol in his own system, Draco groaned, rocking against her in a purely physical response to those words.

“It’s an excellent combination for you,” she said, lifting herself from his lap.

Gods yes. He didn’t know if he said it out loud or entirely in his head. He’d temporarily lost control of his ability to speak; perhaps *his* fine motor skills had been affected by drink.

She hardly needed the encouragement, though, shooting him a most wicked grin, lips stained a lovely ruby from wine and kissing.

What a Friday night, the best kind of Friday night. Hermione’s hands and mouth on him. Friends and fun and conversation, something so simple and so perfect. Something he could spend his whole life enjoying. With a jolt, as his belt buckle clacked metal on metal, he realized he quite literally *could* spend his whole life enjoying this. Because it actually *was* his life. And Hermione had promised to spend it with him.

—

Near the end of the month, Draco stepped through the Floo to find Hermione sitting on their green sofa, Crookshanks curled in her lap. Concern, swallowed by confusion, regurgitated by dread, ascended in his throat.

He always arrived home from work before her. He left before her and returned before her; it had become their routine, a simple consistency he could count on, a predictability he could expect in the absence of the other sorts of routines he’d spend a lifetime abiding by.

“Why—are you—is everything alright?”

“It’s fine,” Hermione said, scratching Crookshanks behind his ears. “I took part of the day off. Could you sit with me for a moment?”

Despite her smile, despite her words, despite what felt like a painfully forced air of nonchalance, the room chilled. Anxiety shot in disconcerting pulses from Draco’s chest, tingling at his fingertips as he crossed the room and sat next to her.

Hermione picked up a piece of parchment from the coffee table—well, one of their coffee tables, as they’d yet to decide what to do with the superfluous one—and handed it to him.

Draco squinted, trying to read the fine, blurry writing.

“Have you considered that you might need reading glasses,” Hermione asked, tone instantly shifted from what it had been a moment before. Curiosity had stolen her focus.

“What?” His head tilted, looking at her with confusion.

“You always squint when you’re reading. And you get headaches sometimes. And you often do this thing—” She mimed bringing an object closer to her face, then further away again in rapid succession. “Plus, you have *a lot* of complaints about the size of the text in *The Count of Monte Cristo*.”

“I—do not. I do not.”

“I really think you might.”

“I have perfect vision. I was a bloody seeker, if you’ll recall.”

“Well, for one, we’re not teenagers anymore.” Draco resisted the impulse to cringe, to gasp, to be mortally offended. He was fairly certain this beautiful woman, the love of his life, his very favorite human on the entire fucking planet, had just implied something unbecoming about him aging. “And two, being a seeker is more about being far-sighted. Which you are. You can see long distances just fine.”

Draco frowned. Sometimes her logic had a very inconvenient component he didn’t enjoy being on the receiving end of. He looked back down at the parchment and caught himself before he adjusted its distance from his face. Squinting, he leaned his head away, just a touch.

She snatched the parchment from his hands.

“I’ll just summarize it, you silly, stubborn man.”

He lifted his brows, uncertain if he ought to be amused, offended, or some strange combination of the two.

“I disclosed to my employer that we are engaged,” she said with a bit

of a heaving breath,

“Oh.”

“I’m being removed from the manor—well, Malfoy Manor.” Draco’s heart sank. He opened his mouth, searching for something he might say. “But that’s ok—I think it’s time, anyway,” she said. “There’s not that much more than needs to be done. And well, if I’m being honest, I think I’d like to get out of there. Nothing has *changed* per se, since Christmas.” She glanced up at him with a sheepish sort of look. “I still don’t see them, your parents. But it’s nerve-racking, more so than it used to be.”

“I—I don’t know what to say, Hermione. You’re sure this is alright? *You’re* alright?”

“I told them because I hoped they’d reassign me—conflicts of interest and all.”

Draco snorted. “Hardly.”

“I’ve been reassigned, starting in December.”

“Where to?”

Uncertainty melted from her features, a glint behind her eyes instead.

“Nott Estate.”

Draco matched her grin with his own, breath spilling in laughter that gushed from overflowing lungs. “That’s perfect—fucking hell, brilliant. Theo will love it. You—gods, you’re never going to finish, though.”

She laughed too, reaching out to prevent Crookshanks from escaping the sofa, trapping the cat in her arms. He leveled his yellow eyes at Draco, perhaps to lay blame for his current circumstances or to plea for help.

“Theo is going to spend literally his entire day, every day, pestering you.”

She scratched at the sweet spot at the base of Crookshank’s skull, temporarily quelling his feline ire.

“So, it won’t be any different than working with you.” She smirked as she said it.

Indignation flared in two distinct waves. First, “I did not *pester*. I observed.” A pause, the second wave. “And I should hope it ends up a little different. You can’t fall in love with Theo; you’ve already agreed to marry *me*.”

Both waves, evidently, Hermione opted to ignore.

“It feels a bit like a bookend. I’m closing my chapter at Malfoy Manor. Permanently, I hope. I put in my time.”

Crookshanks made a feeble noise, twisting his little body in an attempt to escape Hermione’s insistent affections. Draco reached out and pried the cat from her grip, surprised when Crookshanks leapt across the cushions and settled himself on Draco’s lap in a tight ball, cautious gaze now fixed on Hermione.

She narrowed her eyes, made a prim, hilarious huffing sound, and crossed her arms. Draco could see the question, the annoyance that her cat—arguably *theirs*, these days—sought him out for refuge. Draco had no interest in revealing that he’d found the secret to earning Crookshanks’s affections was in adopting the *Theo method*: an abundance of treats.

Draco briefly considered rubbing it in, a little jab that the cat actually, genuinely seemed to like him. But a more important thought rose to the surface, demanding acknowledgement.

“Why did you go back? Why agree to go back there, after everything?” Draco swallowed the shameful feeling floating with his curiosities, tangled and inextricable and tasting terrible, rancid. “After everything that happened to you there, because of my family. Why go back?”

All these years later, her fingers found her left arm, exposed, unmarred. “I didn’t want to let her win, you know that. Or your family. Or the manor. I—wanted to beat that place. Prove it didn’t have anything over me. And I can hardly be upset about it. I got something rather lovely out of it, in the end.”

“Oh?”

Crookshanks scampered, clambering from Draco’s lap and zipping out of the room at Hermione’s quick movement. Suddenly on her knees, leaning back on her heels, perched just beside him, her hands found his face, fingers cradled beneath his jaw.

“I got you,” she said.

He leaned into her touch, a small sway as her hands held him.

“I suppose that’s not the worst trade off.”

“Is that understatement?” Her smile draped him in a contentment that he grew more and more accustomed to each day, realizing he got to keep it. “From Draco Malfoy?” She paused, an exaggerated thinking face pinching her features: lips, nose, brows. “You’re getting better at it.”

Draco reached for her, finally powering the limbs that had gone limp in surprise at her quick shift. His left hand found her waist, his right, her legs, maneuvering her to sit, partly draped over him. He pulled her close.

“You promise everything is alright? With this change? You’re not worried about having been pulled from the manor?” She was shaking her head before he’d even finished his barrage of questions. He couldn’t escape the memory of her face, years ago, when his parents had threatened to have her removed from the manor. “It doesn’t reflect poorly on your career?”

Another shake of her head, sending her curls swaying and dancing and spiraling with her momentum.

“My job is highly specialized. It requires training and experience. But I’m not the only person trained to do it. Someone else will finish Malfoy Manor, and I’m not put out about it at all.”

His fingers pressed deeper into the flesh at her hip. “If you insist.”

“And it’s honestly a rather happy accident that I get to do Theo’s estate. It’s been fairly low priority—”

“—Nott Senior would have been terribly insulted—”

She snorted. “—but getting to see Theo every day is hardly the worst outcome for a reassignment. It won’t be so bad at all.”

“I don’t know, Granger,” he whispered, dropping a light kiss to her shoulder because he could, because it was *right there*, all tanned and exposed and dotted with a square of freckles that reminded him of the pegasus constellation. “Theo has *a lot* of illegal stuff. He joked about trying to acquire Chimaera eggs once.”

Hermione stiffened in his lap.

“Those are a Class A—he was kidding, right?”

“With Theo? It’s hard to tell.”

Chapter End Notes

i'm running out of chances to thank [Endless_musings](#) and [persephone_stone](#) for their support on these chapters! thank you so much my friends!

i hope everyone is having a wonderful week! i cannot believe we only have two more chapters after this! I don't properly know how to express my gratitude to everyone reading, so i hope that my sincerest THANK YOU will suffice! y'all are honestly the best!

Chapter 47: +.500, +.500, +.500

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

November

Draco preferred doing most things with Hermione. This included unpleasant, unfortunate, uninteresting visits to Gringotts in his nearly year-long quest towards official disinheritance. The whole process, inherently isolating by way of divorcing oneself from one's family, was eased by the pressure of her hand in his, sitting next to him in a Goblin's office.

Hermione's presence meant they offered him champagne again, too. A perk, he supposed, of being a war hero. Evidently such perks were similar to those of being obscenely wealthy. He crammed his instinctual, petty, jealous reaction to such a fact into the farthest corner of his mind, banished. He'd already decided, picked her over money and influence. He wouldn't allow himself a moment of regret.

"The Malfoys have noted a missing, priceless artifact from their collections that they require be returned," the Goblin said. Draco hadn't bothered remembering his name, but internally winced when he realized Hermione probably had. He found it difficult to engage in niceties when voluntarily stripping himself of what accounted to most of his power and authority in the world.

Her hand in his: it really, *really* helped.

"What is it?" Draco asked. He couldn't fathom what else they wanted, or thought he still had. "I didn't take any other jewelry than those pieces I've already returned. I have in writing—your writing—that they've rescinded their claim on the remaining property from inside my flat."

The Goblin cleared his throat. His small, clawed hand traced the parchment on his desk. The scratching sound it generated pressed directly against Draco's eardrums, agitating. "It has come to their attention that the object in question was not in *your* flat. It is something of great value to the Malfoy Estate."

That only confused Draco more, temples aching from the force of pushing his brows together. The Goblin tapped a finger to the parchment, reading from it. “A first edition copy of *Hogwarts, A History* with editor annotations.”

Hermione’s hand tightened in his, then dropped away as she covered her mouth to mask the tiny, surprised noise she’d made.

“That—that was a gift,” Draco forced out, stomach plummeting to the floor. “Given *years* ago.”

“It is an artifact and heirloom of registered historical importance to the Malfoy Estate and the wizarding world at large. Unless formally released from ownership by the Estate, it cannot be given as a gift.”

Of all the things. Of all the *fucking* thing his parents might have chosen to plant their pettiness on. Of all the crops they might slash and burn in their war of attrition, in their pummeling of his pride, they’d picked something that meant very little to them, but so, so much to Hermione.

Fury unfurled in his chest, latching onto lingering hurt, damaged pride, and the loss of his sense of self. It swelled beneath his skin, slipping into all the spaces between flesh and muscle and bone, filling up every last crevice available for diversion towards rage. Towards hatred.

His parents didn’t care about that book. Not in the slightest. He’d neither exaggerated nor engaged in willful ignorance all those years ago when he’d said that he and Hermione were likely the only people who even knew the thing existed. They couldn’t take it. He wouldn’t let them.

His nostrils flared, pulling in a huge breath as his lips pressed so tightly together they’d started tingling from lack of blood flow. He’d done so well, for so long. He’d been so mature. He’d tried so hard, after he exploded—quite literally—at Christmas dinner, to handle this disinheritance with the grace Hermione deserved of him. But this? This was too much.

Hermione’s hand found his again, tugged at it, pulling his attention to her. He turned his head to find a perplexing emotion swimming in her eyes.

“It’s alright, Draco. We can return it.”

“It’s not alright. We shouldn’t *have* to return it. I gave it to you.”

The Goblin tried to say something, a quick interruption that sounded suspiciously like *it was never eligible for giving*. Draco snapped.

“I heard you the first fucking time.” His free hand slammed down on the desk as punctuation, sending a sharp sting through his palm. The pain braced him, a reminder that this nightmare was real. Reality, not imagined.

“Draco, it’s alright,” Hermione said again, words rearranged, hitting him at a slightly different angle. He looked to her, and despite the anger strangling him, he saw truth in her intent. She meant it. She meant when she said they could give it back.

And that made it worse. Much worse. His parents had taken enough, too much, and still, they wanted more. How *dare* they.

Hermione angled herself, knees swinging towards his chair. She brought her other arm over to him, both hands holding his.

“Calm down, Draco. I’m not—I’m not upset, it’s alright.”

“You should be upset.”

He yanked his hands from hers. He didn’t want her help. Not right now.

“Do you—do you need to occlude?”

“Do I—what?” His head snapped back around to watch her. He half expected to see his own anger reflected back at him. But she looked calm, concerned.

It sounded like a trap. But didn’t look like one.

“To help you—it’s alright, if you do, need to, that is.” She reached for his hands again. “This isn’t worth being angry about. It’s a bit—emotionally charged, I know. So if you need to use Occlumency to help control that, you should.” She inhaled a shaky breath, his first sighting of her own cracks. “Or don’t. You’re allowed to be angry, if you want to be. I just don’t think this is worth it.”

The Goblin interrupted again, undeterred by Draco’s reaction or the revelatory sort of moment he’d been experiencing, watching as Hermione gave him permission, gave him *understanding*, to use

Occlumency as a tool if he needed it.

“The Malfoys have informed the bank of your scheduled meeting with the Ministry’s Inheritance and Estate Magic team at the end of this month. They have most graciously allowed you to return the book at that meeting.”

Draco’s parents had wormed their way beneath his skin and irritated him in a way that twitched his fingers, desperate to rip at his flesh just to get them out. He might have liked to be the kind of person who didn’t need a little bit of Occlumency just then. But as it stood, he wasn’t that kind of person. He had limits on what he could control without magic, without the tools he’d so carefully cobbled together.

His lips already felt a little numb, smashed together in emphasis of his clenched jaw and the smothered vitriol he wanted to sling. He latched onto that numbness, carefully, letting the tiniest bit of ice freeze his veins, cool his anger. He chilled, froze the fury, flaked it away. He exhaled, finding logic in place of his anger. It felt a bit like Hermione, her sensibilities brushing up against his.

He isolated the betrayal next, the feeling that his parents had done this intentionally, with purpose to cause distress, to hurt. How had they even realized it was missing, anyway? Had they conducted a full fucking— *more* anger, isolate, flake—inventory of every last object in the estate? They probably did, not trusting him. He supposed they were justified, since they’d found the book missing. But the mistrust struck differently than the disinheritance did. He’d thought they might force a sort of civility in this. Perhaps not. Perhaps even that was too much to expect.

Draco remained calm, though a bit numb, through the remainder of the meeting. They scheduled a ten year payment plan to return every last drop of the inheritance he’d already spent. He refused to live in their debt—any of their debt—ever again. As the issue of the first edition copy of *Hogwarts, A History* reared its head again, it hurt less this time. Hermione squeezed his hand, repeated herself for the umpteenth time.

“It’s alright. I’ll give it back.” She smiled, and he started letting the warmth back in. Different warmth, not anger this time. The Goblin left the meeting room, leaving them alone. And it was done. There was nothing left to be angry about, nothing he could control, at least. Hermione turned to him. “I never really wanted it anyway, if you’ll recall.”

Draco smiled, Occlumency melting. “Oh, you wanted it. Very, *very* badly. You’re just far too noble to take something so precious and rare for yourself. Honestly, it’s probably for the best that I’m disinheriting. You’d have made a terrible manor lady. No inclinations towards hoarding precious and rare things.”

Hermione stood from her chair, pulling his hand with her, forcing him to stand as well. “Isn’t hoarding precious and rare things something *dragons* do?” She lifted her brows, lips pursed in a terrible attempt at concealing a smile. “You’d have done enough for the both of us, I think.”

Draco laughed, feeling closer to equalized than he had since their meeting began.

She let go of his hand, pressing her palm to the center of his chest instead. Suddenly much more serious.

“But it is,” she said. “A good thing you’re disinheriting.”

And that was it, her statement, full stop.

“It is.”

They didn’t need to qualify with the *why*’s. They both knew. And they’d decided.

—

“I want my surprise now.”

Even from his place beside her as they walked, witness only to her profile, Draco saw the exasperated—in a fond sort of way, he assumed—eye roll Hermione gave him. He wrapped an arm around her shoulder as they walked, shoving his other hand in his pocket. He leaned into her hair.

“You think I’m kidding; I’m not. I think I’ve earned it, haven’t I? That horrid meeting at Gringotts and now *this*?”

Hermione broke, laughing, not even bothering to stifle her giggles as she led them to a bench in Diagon Alley. They sat, and Draco waited patiently, ever-so-patiently, for her to surmount her laughter.

“You think you’ve earned your surprise?” she finally asked, lifting a brow at him in an effective attempt at enacting his brand of snark. “You’ve done nothing but complain and grumble since we left Gringotts.”

“Because you sprung a surprise appointment on me—on the weekend—after I already had to deal with Goblins and my disinheritance.” He hadn’t yet decided if he felt real annoyance or affected, faux annoyance. They bled together sometimes, those feelings. “Honestly how dare you, you presumptuous witch. You made me get my eyes examined.”

He crossed his arms, knowing instantly how petulant and ridiculous he must look. He let himself smile at that. She smiled, too.

“And for good reason,” she said.

If she wanted to rub it in, he’d decide on real annoyance. Playful annoyance was reserved for witches who didn’t revel in their victories.

“I only agreed to attend the unexpected eye exam *you* set for me because you promised you had a surprise for me afterwards that you promised I would *definitely like*.”

Draco leaned against the bench, spread his arm across the back. He’d been hoping for something involving lingerie. Perhaps Pansy had forced her to buy more. He didn’t have especially strong feelings about Pansy’s war on Hermione’s wardrobe; he could take or leave her input there. But he did—*very much*—enjoy the sudden abundance of laces and satins and tiny little things that made Hermione look very imminently fuckable every time she put them on.

So he’d entertained Hermione’s insistence that they stop by a healer’s office in Diagon Alley, where she’d reserved an appointment over concern for his eyesight. He didn’t expect anything to come of it, except for a peek at whatever pretty lingerie he hoped she’d worn that day.

Then the healer waved his wand once, adjusted several floating spells around Draco’s head and hummed a little *mmhmm* sort of noise before saying, “Ah, yes. Looks like you’re far-sighted. I’ll show you to our selection of reading glasses. They should help quite a bit.”

Hermione, of course, found the whole less-than-five-minute ordeal endlessly amusing, suppressing giggles as Draco perused a selection of

glasses he had no interest in perusing.

She pulled something from her coat pocket, visible breath puffing in the cold air between them.

“You may need your reading glasses for this,” she said with a wicked, evil, absolutely gleaming smirk spreading across her face. “Why don’t you pop them on?”

“I didn’t take you for a sadist, Hermione Granger. I will *not* put them on. I didn’t even want to purchase them.”

She frowned, part pout, part genuine disappointment.

“But you look so dashing in them.”

He hadn’t expected that. His head quirked, a brow lifting.

“I *what*?”

“They looked good on you.” Her cheeks were already stained pink from the cold, but he didn’t think he imagined the way her flush deepened, rosy and lovely. “Very academic. Studious.” Her voice dropped, quieter at the end, as if she’d said more than she intended to say and suddenly found herself wildly self-conscious of that fact. But she did say it, and now Draco had a whole slew of thoughts barreling through his brain in response to that reaction.

“Is that so? Well I—we might need to save that particular revelation for later, I think. Perhaps when we aren’t in public.”

It felt good to have a little control again, after losing so much of it in their meeting at Gringotts, in being forced to face his (alleged) far-sightedness, in still not knowing what tiny surprise waited in the box she held between them.

Hermione’s embarrassment faded, replaced by that fond sort of exasperation she so often had with him. He loved loved *loved* riling this woman up.

“Fine. Here. You are so exhausting.”

Draco took the box from her, almost made a joke about jewelry but decided against it, and opened it up.

He frowned, more out of confusion than anything else, as he pulled some kind of muggle technology from within. He turned the device

over in his hand, opened it at the hinge. It lit up; Hermione's name popped up on the screen. He stared. Marveled. Confused. A bit concerned.

Hermione leaned closer, pointed to one of the buttons. "Push that one," she said. "When I send you a message, you push that button to read it."

The screen changed, showing up what he assumed was her message. His head tilted even further, ear nearly touching his shoulder. "What—does that mean?"

"It's a heart, see? It's how you send love with what's available on the keyboard."

"Huh. Looks like a distorted rune for patience and a three, to me."

"It's"—she huffed, breaking off—"you're so exasperating." She said it like it was a bad thing, but she smiled at him all the same. "Maybe you'll see it better if you squint. Or rather, don't wear your glasses and just hold it close to your face. Maybe you'll see the heart, then." She crossed her arms. "Not that you've earned it."

She was joking, mostly, but he could tell she wanted him to have it. Use it. So, Draco tried. He cleared his throat and, on a bench in the middle of Diagon Alley, he asked the great Hermione Granger how to work a muggle cell phone.

"What do I do with it?"

"Well, I'll send you things on it, probably. You just need to push the button I showed you to open my messages. And I'll show you how to keep it charged back at the flat." Her face lit up. "I bought another magic to electricity converter so we don't have to steal from the toaster."

"A pointless invention."

"Hush. It's convenient and you love it. I know you do."

She leaned into him again, peering over the phone. Her hair tumbled over his arms and for as ridiculous as he felt, fiddling with a bit of technology he had no real use or inclination for, he liked how she smiled when she showed him what to do with it.

"If you push this button," she said, "then this one, you can select

someone to make a voice call. I've added myself and my parents already. I can add Harry, too. He has one. But I wasn't sure if your silly, prattish, sensibilities would allow for such a thing."

"If I'm going to have three people and only three people in this little torture box, let's not have Harry fucking Potter be one of them."

Hermione rolled her eyes, but slid closer to him anyway, likely in hopes of leaching body heat in the chilly November air. He'd done nothing but needle at her for the last hour or so and yet, even when she rolled her eyes and called him exasperating, it was done with such fondness.

Was this what it was like? To be in love with someone and not have to *fight* so hard for it anymore? To not be at odds with other people over it? Was this what it felt like to be allowed something good, something happy? He slid his arm from the back of the bench, wrapping it around her shoulder and tugging her close.

"Try a voice call," she said. "Try calling me. Reception might be a little spotty in the middle of a magical area, but I think it should connect."

With an arched brow, he pushed the button for her name. The screen changed, now displaying *calling Hermione Granger*. She motioned for him to hold the device to his ear, which he did, feeling absurd.

He probably looked like an idiot, holding a little muggle device to the side of his face.

Hermione's phone lit up, and so did her face. A huge smile broke across her features. She flipped her phone open, putting it to her ear.

"Hello," she said.

He heard her more because she sat right next to him than through the device itself, which mostly sounded crackly and broken and generally unpleasant in his ear. But he played along.

"Hello," he said, trying to match her in tone and volume. He didn't want to look like any more of an idiot than he had to.

Although, if he really thought about it, that spell had long since been cast. They were sitting on a bench, staring at each other, both holding silly muggle magic boxes to their ears.

“I love you,” she said and if it wasn’t the most perfect fucking moment, Draco didn’t know what was. He supposed he was allowed to look a bit like an idiot. For her, at least.

“I love you, too.”

“Are you ready to go home?”

He nodded, still smiling, so warm despite the weather.

She flipped her phone shut.

So did he.

—

They arrived at the Ministry twenty minutes early. Anxiety wouldn’t allow for anything later, battering Draco’s bones and crunching them to dust. He felt drawn and quartered and bled utterly dry in anticipation of it, of *this*.

Neither he nor Hermione had seen his parents in nearly a year, not since the terrible, explosive, Christmas dinner that nearly ruined everything. A year. In some ways, it felt like no time had passed at all. Those first several months had a most unreal, lurching sort of quality to them. Time seemed to surge forward and fall back and twist and turn in such a way that it sometimes felt like Draco blinked in one month and by the next blink, another month had passed him by. He supposed grief did that, mourning the loss of a relationship and a life that had been so precious, so dear to him.

But he had her now, again, hand held in his with a near-deadly force. As they walked into the Ministry, he supposed he didn’t need circulation in his fingertips anyway, not if it meant providing an outlet for Hermione’s stress.

“It will be fine,” he said. “The spellwork should be quick. They—this isn’t entirely unheard of. More and more old families are having disagreements like this.”

“But we still have to see them. Face them,” Hermione said between what he suspected were intended to be deep, calming breaths. He

worried she might accidentally pass out if she kept it up.

“I know. I don’t like it, either. But blood magic, wards, lines of inheritance and responsibility in estate affairs—it’s all tied up in the family magic quite literally in my blood.”

They stopped at the end of a long hallway, pushed open a heavy door and spoke to the receptionist waiting inside. With no delay, she ushered them into an entirely utilitarian conference room. Barren and sterile and devoid of distractions. Draco pulled out a chair for Hermione as they settled, waiting.

“It feels so empty in here,” Hermione said, tapping her fingers at the arm of her chair. “I—I think I always assumed that old family magic had a sort of archaic, esoteric quality to it. Maybe I expected giant carved stone circles and sacred springs and blessed earth or something of the sort.”

Draco snorted. “Once upon a time, maybe. By now, most of it’s in our blood. And that can be anywhere.”

She made a thoughtful sound, new information catalogued in that brain of hers. She reached into her bag and placed *Hogwarts, A History* on the table between them.

Draco’s heart seized, hating this. Hating that they had to give it back when the one person in the world who would love it more than anyone sat right there, ready to relinquish ownership.

“You had the chance to read it, right?” He felt ridiculous the moment he’d spoken the question aloud. Hermione laughed. “The exaggerated eye roll doesn’t feel necessary,” he said. “Dare I suggest, it’s a touch offensive.”

She only rolled her eyes again, lobbing him with a smile.

“I read it several times. I love it, of course. The annotations were—lovely.” *Lovely* came out on a wistful breath, exhaled with wishes, he assumed, of not having to give it up. “It was a perfect gift, a wonderful gift. Even if I only got to keep it for a short time.”

The sincerity in her tone hurt more than if she hadn’t meant it, Draco decided.

“What’s this?” he asked, flipping a ribbon poking out from between the pages. He didn’t recall it having a bookmark.

“Oh, *thank you*— I nearly forgot.” She cracked the book open and pulled out a length of green satin.

It took Draco a moment, watching her wind the ribbon absently around her palm. And then it clicked.

“Is that—is that the ribbon I conjured for you? The day you gave me my wand back?”

She looked down at the ribbon wrapped around her hand, then back up to him, nodding slowly. She smiled, eyes a touch downturned as she watched him with what looked like a sudden bout of unexpected emotion.

“It is,” she confirmed. The nod had been enough, but she forged ahead regardless. “I’ve been using it as a bookmark in here for years.”

His chest, still so tight from seeing the book, from knowing they had to give it back, unclenched, warmth spiraling outward. To be overcome by such a sensation, such love; what a gift. He lifted his wand and sent the ribbon twisting into her hair again, tying it at the nape.

Her eyes fluttered shut, just briefly, long enough that he felt it, too. It almost felt like occupying two moments in his life at once: years before, conjuring a ribbon meant as commentary on the state of her hair, and in the present, doing it again as he prepared to give up the last of what he had left, but knowing he would still have her.

Lucius and Narcissa walked into the conference room with a Ministry Representative at exactly the time they were expected to arrive: not a minute earlier, not a minute later.

Draco didn’t look at them as they entered, couldn’t tear his eyes from the wood grain table which he suspected was actually nothing of the sort. It was probably plastic, or particle board, or something else equally as cost-saving and mundane, topped to make it look like a solid slab of wood.

His parents sat opposite them. The Ministry representative took her place at the head of the table. Hermione hadn’t moved. Draco couldn’t recall breathing.

Finally, he looked up.

First, a glance at his father. Grey meeting grey, a clashing of steel.

Draco refused to balk, refused to give even just the tiniest bit. Much as he didn't want to think any such thought, the first observation Draco's brain provided him was: Lucius looked better, healthier. A smaller, even more furious part of him lamented that such an observation comforted him, in a way, a way he hated. He couldn't escape it, concern for his father, not in proximity, at least.

Draco straightened his spine, pressing it flush against the back of his chair, muscles pulling each vertebrae as tall as he could sit. He broke eye contact first, in control, not in deference. Perhaps the pleasure he got out of feeling in control could be labeled petty, but as it so happened, he felt a bit petty.

He shifted to look at his mother. Her posture, her gaze, everything about her projected much less rigidity than Lucius. She looked sad. And that hurt; it hurt worse. Her eyes were always softer, anyway. That pretty blue he sometimes wished he had for himself. Draco swallowed against a painful tightness squeezing at the back of his throat.

He turned his head further, finding Hermione at his side. She might have been looking at his parents, or perhaps past them, through them. But she turned to meet his gaze and released a small breath. She tapped her pinky, ring, middle, and index finger on the tabletop in a slow succession, just once per finger. Finally, on another deep breath, she pushed *Hogwarts, A History* towards the center of the table.

He gave her the first word, and would let her have the last one, too, if she wanted it. She could say whatever she wanted to these people he'd once called family. Thinking of them in that context twisted guilt with regret in his stomach, but he refused to acknowledge it.

"Your book," Hermione said, lifeless.

Neither Lucius nor Narcissa moved. They did not acknowledge that she'd spoken in any way. The book sat awkwardly between them, a dead weight at the center of the table. Finally, the Ministry Representative stood, leaned over the table, and pulled the book towards her, letting it rest on her right: Lucius and Narcissa's side of the table.

The Ministry Representative cleared her throat. "My name is Vivian Melling, and I will be conducting the final dissolution of magical ties in today's requested disinheritance. To confirm before we begin: I have present one Draco Lucius Malfoy, born the fifth of June, 1980,

correct?"

"Yes." If things hadn't felt official, cold, and sterile before, they certainly did now.

"And his affianced, Hermione Jean Granger, born the nineteenth of September, 1979, correct?"

"Yes." Hermione's hand found his beneath the table as his parents' names and birthdates were confirmed.

He hadn't meant to look at her, but Draco found his mother's eyes, watched as her lips pulled tight. He saw it happen, when she glanced down at Hermione's left hand, resting atop the table, and the ring on her fourth finger. Perhaps Draco was an idiot; he certainly did idiotic things sometimes. It hadn't even occurred to him, not as he waded through his murky bog of emotions in preparing for this meeting, that his parents wouldn't yet know that he'd officially proposed to Hermione.

They should have assumed, to be sure. But to know with certainty. To see the ring. To know beyond a shadow of a doubt that Draco had wholly chosen her instead of them. He hadn't prepared himself for the wave of sympathy that crested overtop of his mental barriers, stuck on the look in his mother's eyes. On the wedding she would never plan. Wouldn't attend. The grandchildren she wouldn't know. The life, his life, that she no longer had any part of.

He flinched, physically flinched, from the ache behind his ribs. Hermione offered his hand a squeeze beneath the table. She must have noticed; his reaction felt so obvious, so apparent.

Wand weighing came next: only Lucius and Draco's being required.

"A different wand is on file for you, Mr. Draco Lucius." The way he'd been addressed struck Draco as peculiar, a mental stutter before his brain caught up. With multiple Malfoys in the room, given names would be the only option for clear communication. A rustle of parchments, then: "Ah, this wand does appear to be linked with your Gringotts accounts, however."

"That wand, with the unicorn hair, it's my primary. The one with a dragon heartstring core was a temporary wand"—the words scraped his throat—"post-war."

"I see. I'll update your information."

Draco's jaw ached. Every moment felt too formal, too forced. His parents sat three fucking feet away from him and he couldn't shake how utterly bizarre it felt to be at a table with them and not have a feast's worth of food to sort through.

More rustling parchments. This time, held up for them to see.

"I have here the Malfoy Estate lineages, deeds, and familial claims and responsibilities. I am confirming, with both parties present, that Mr. Draco Lucius is to be removed from these documents and shall henceforth have no further rights or responsibilities to the Malfoy Estate. Is that correct?"

For the longest, most terrible moment, no one spoke. Draco expected his father to spit his assent. But a heavy silence ate away at the spaces between them, instead.

Finally, from Draco, teeth ground together: "It is correct."

Then Lucius, equally as forced: "Correct."

Draco couldn't feel his fingers again, and he didn't know if it was him or Hermione who squeezed too hard.

"Excellent, then we shall proceed."

It didn't feel excellent. But it probably should have. He'd demanded this, after all. Still, it felt awful. Shoulder collapsing, the very definition of heart aching. Draco risked a glance at Narcissa again, unwilling—or perhaps incapable—of looking at his father as Ms. Melling stood and prepared for whatever came next.

Draco regretted looking the moment his eyes found her. She didn't look at him, but instead looked straight ahead, fury cracking through every tight line in her features: around her mouth, at the corners of her eyes, between her brows. Despite that, her eyes shined, watery, welling. And when she blinked, a single renegade tear broke free. She made no move to wipe the offender away.

Draco couldn't watch, didn't have the stomach for his mother's disappointment. Not when he had so much of his own.

The center of the table opened up, pulling Draco's focus to the large, flat, quartz bowl that rose from somewhere beneath.

"Now for the less pleasant bit," Ms. Melling said. Draco knew vaguely

what to expect. Blood magic and blood wards were named as such for a reason, after all.

The bowl resembled a pensieve, but Draco knew it wouldn't be filled with memories.

Slowly, it levitated towards Draco, coming to rest directly in front of him.

"If you would hold your wand arm over the bowl, please."

Draco disentangled his fingers from Hermione's and did as instructed. With a quick spell, his palm split open, blood dripping into the bowl. He hadn't even felt it, so numb from the force with which he'd clung to Hermione's hand.

"Please keep your hand in place for a moment—ah, yes, that will do."

Another quick spell and Draco's skin stitched itself back together perfectly. Despite what he could only assume was an unfathomable amount of practice doing that very spell, Hermione apparently still had her doubts, immediately pulling his hand to her, inspecting the status of his skin.

"I'm fine," he assured her in a low voice as Lucius paid his price in blood as well.

The bowl levitated back to its place at the center of the table, looking utterly innocuous apart from the deep ruby blood rippling inside.

Hermione brought his hand beneath the table again, holding it with a touch less force than before. It quirked a small smile at the corner of his mouth as he glanced at her, knowing she was likely trying to be gentle on his recently exsanguinated limb.

From the head of the table, Ms. Melling began an incantation, wand drawn and pointed at the quartz bowl.

The blood began to flow, swirling in a stream that crept up the edges of the shallow bowl, nearly spilling over. Magic flashed, shimmered in a storm, settled. Then, the blood separated: two distinct masses spiraling around each other, a red whirlpool, fractured, in orbit. Two distinct bloodlines. Blood no longer recognizing blood as familiar, of the same.

With another incantation, the bowl ignited, flames shooting up in two

slightly differing shades. One, a more golden hue. The other, almost silvery. Draco couldn't say with certainty which color belonged to which bloodline, but he could guess.

When the fire extinguished, no blood remained.

Empty, like the new sensation cracking open behind his ribs.

"And that's it. Thank you for coming in today. You will find no further contractual obligations or privileges relating to blood or law between your two parties. The Ministry appreciates your choice to conduct this manner in an official, legal capacity." Her head wobbled, a bit of a shake, a bit of a sigh. "Homegrown rituals do have a tendency to end in violence."

Draco had difficulty deciding if the queasiness in the pit of his stomach came from that image or from the finality of what had just occurred. Lucius stood abruptly, but didn't leave the table. He leaned over it, palms flat, mouth twisted to a sneer.

For a brief, horrifying moment, Draco expected him to say something awful, to spew an atrocity to the effect of *enjoy your mudblood cunt* or something equally as vile. He braced, prepared to defend himself, defend Hermione, defend their choices.

But instead, Narcissa stood, too. She put her hand on Lucius's upper arm, and whispered something so quiet that the sound couldn't travel the width of the table between them. Lucius lifted his palms. Stood straight. Turned and left without a word, cane clicking on linoleum as he walked.

Ms. Melling, who'd been standing at the head of the table, looked relatively unfazed.

"All things considered," she said, turning to Draco as she picked up the copy of *Hogwarts, a History* his parents had left behind. "This went well. Take whatever time you need." And she exited too, leaving Draco and Hermione still sitting at that horribly utilitarian table.

Take whatever time you need. To what? Process the fact that not a single word had been exchanged between him and his parents? That, of all people, Hermione had been the only person to try and say *anything*? They'd been given privacy. What did they expect of him? That he'd break down? Cry? Need an indeterminable amount of time to search himself for his new identity?

Draco swallowed, noticing that Hermione watched him, body and chair angled in his direction. Perhaps she was waiting for the moment he cracked, crumbled, disintegrated, now that he no longer had a familial identity to glue his cobbled parts together.

He felt sadness, yes. Deep in his bones. An ache like something inside him, in his magical core, had vanished. It was an empty feeling, hollow.

But he felt lighter, too. Lighter felt better, felt like hope.

He turned to Hermione.

“It’s really real,” he said.

“I know. I’ve known for a long time.”

Draco inhaled deeply. He couldn’t shake the sight of his mother crying. He wanted to believe her, believe *in* her, and he wondered if he would ever truly stop. “Do you think *they* were real?” he asked, voice quiet in their impersonal Ministry conference room. “Her tears—my mother’s.”

Hermione’s hand shifted to his knee. Try as Draco might, he found himself incapable of meeting her eyes, gaze fixed on her hand instead, on the small circle her forefinger traced against his trousers.

“She—” Hermione paused, swallowed, started again. “She bears as much guilt in this as your father, but I think her motivations were different. I think of everyone who was just in this room, she wanted this the least. Less than you, even. She just—she didn’t know how to stop it. She made it worse in a lot of ways.”

“I’m going to miss her. Is that terrible to admit? After everything, I think I’ll still miss her. It wasn’t always like this.”

Hermione’s hand moved again, to his hair this time: raking it behind his ears, smoothing it at the base of his neck, offering him comfort through touch.

Her voice washed over him in a quiet, reassuring spell. “I know. And maybe it won’t be forever. But for now, you’ve done the right thing for *you*.”

“For you, too.”

He exhaled, allowing himself another moment to mourn before he reached up, catching her hand at the side of his neck. “Marry me.”

She laughed. “You’ve already asked me that question.” She held up her left hand, wiggled her fingers, ruby ring glinting under the horrendous white Ministry lights.

“I don’t mean in eight months to a year when Pansy has finally coerced you into picking *her* favorite flowers for *your* wedding. Not when she’s forced you into a dress you don’t even like because she’s had it tailored too small. Not with a big to-do. Just—marry me. Now. Soon—this weekend?”

He’d never felt more certain, more urgent, about anything in his life.

“I’m no one right now, Hermione. I want to be your husband.”

Her mouth opened. Closed. Opened again.

She looked down at her ring.

“That’s—very short notice.”

“That’s typically how eloping works, love. You don’t want a big wedding, anyway. I’ve seen the panic in your eyes when Pansy corners you.”

“I want my parents to—”

“They’ll come. It’ll be small, but they’ll come. Of course they’ll come.”

“Draco I”—her breath gusted, as if preemptively shocked with herself —“I actually love this idea. I do. But I don’t know that we can find someone to perform bonding magic with less than a week’s notice. Not unless we wanted to do it in a conference room like this with another Ministry Official.”

Draco smirked.

Everything made sense.

So much sense.

A stupendous, idiotic, absolutely outstanding amount of sense.

“Theo can do it.”

Her mouth opened and closed again as if on a hinge she couldn't quite control. Open once for shock, closed for awe, open again for outrage, and closed for confusion. "He what?"

Draco had no control over his wild grin. "He's going to marry us. And your parents will be there, of course. And Blaise will mix us delicious drinks to celebrate. And Pansy can come but she won't be in charge." Hermione laughed at that, and it felt like he'd convinced her, almost giddy with giggles. "Those Potters can come if they must. Weasley because I know you'll ask, and Lavender because they're a package deal these days. But that's it. That's all. You and me and those people and no one else."

She brushed his hair from his forehead again, fingers pushing it behind his ear.

"You should consider a haircut."

"Is that a yes?"

"It's a yes."

Chapter End Notes

so much love to [Endless_musings](#) and [persephone_stone](#)!

wishing a very merry christmas to you and yours if you are celebrating today! i cannot believe we only have one chapter to go after this! i cannot possibly thank everyone enough for reading this story and coming on this adventure to me! it has been such a wonderful gift for me, getting to share this story and see your reactions! thank you, thank you, thank you!

Chapter 48: +.583, +.583, +.583

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

December

On Wednesday, the thirtieth of November, Draco Malfoy officially completed all required processes for his disinheritance. On Friday, the second of December, he and Hermione arrived at Nott Manor for what had quickly become a standing gathering with their friends.

Draco brushed a sparkling green cinder from Hermione's cloak, dipping in close to kiss her cheek. It was a stolen moment of solidarity he had no shame indulging in.

"Ready?" he asked against her skin.

"Don't ask me that as if *I'm* the one who's nervous." She smiled, leaning into him, probably in part to push him away, and subsequently, forward. They had several items on the agenda for their evening, and Nott Manor only represented the first stop.

They found Theo, Pansy, and Blaise in what had become their usual spot on Friday evenings.

"Hello," Hermione said, announcing them. Her voice wobbled just a bit. She put on a good show, but Draco saw her hovering nerves. Better concealed than his, but present all the same. He draped an arm over her shoulder; she was such a convenient height for such things. He hoped the action looked casual and didn't give away the small swarm of nerves fluttering between the two of them.

"We can't stay long," he said.

Pansy's head snapped up from her wine glass. "What? Why?" Sharp, stinging questions. "Fridays are our thing."

"We just came by to ask Theo something, actually. Depending on how that goes, we have something to ask you and Blaise, too."

At the large bar on the far side of the room, Draco watched as Blaise

set a whisky bottle on the counter. He picked up a shot glass, holding eye contact with Draco. He smiled, winked, and drank. Blaise knew. *Of course* he knew.

Theo was right: Blaise could be a bit annoying with that *maybe I* saw it air about him. Despite that, Draco smiled. He turned to Theo.

“You did end up learning bonding magic, didn’t you? Got that certificate from the Ministry?”

Theo shot up from his seat, chair dragging against antique carpets. At the same time, Pansy let out a confused sort of shriek, not unlike a banshee. Draco presumed she meant it to convey both excitement and a demand for more information.

Before Draco could blink, Theo closed the space between them.

Hermione pulled a cardstock invitation from her bag: handwritten instructions on her nicest stationary. She handed it to Theo.

“Sunday,” she said. “The information is all there. That Floo address is my parents’ house, so it’s in a muggle area. But they know about magic, of course. They have a really lovely garden.”

Pansy ripped the cardstock from Theo’s grip, having abandoned her seat and her wine. To Draco’s right, Blaise appeared, handing him a small glass of whisky. When Draco looked again at Hermione, she held a champagne flute in her left hand.

Draco supposed Blaise had his uses and was worth keeping around despite his *all-knowing* annoyances.

Pansy made several unintelligible noises as she read the invitation. Hermione did an excellent—truly stellar—job of ignoring her.

“So, Theo. You will marry us, then? Won’t you?” Hermione asked, probably noticing that he hadn’t actually *said* anything yet.

Theo’s grin hadn’t dropped since the moment Draco said the word *certificate*. Impossibly, it grew wider. He almost —*almost*— looked a touch teary-eyed.

“We’re hugging now, Granger,” Theo said. Pansy had to step back, making an offended noise as he pulled Hermione into a hug. “Of course I will,” he said. “I’ve been waiting for you to ask.”

“What are you wearing?” Pansy interrupted, launching into an interrogation just as Draco expected she would. “Are you *pregnant*? Why are you—what are you—” She conjured a measuring tape, setting it to Hermione in an effort to catalogue her measurements.

“Pansy, I’m not pregnant. We’re just—I don’t want a big wedding.”

Pansy made several shocked, scoff-adjacent noises, eyes darting between them all, as if seeking some kind of sanity in what she clearly deemed insane.

Hermione yanked at the measuring tape presently measuring her bust, pulling it away and vanishing it.

“We only want the people we care about the most with us,” she said, crossing her arms and lifting her brows.

Pansy froze as if Hermione’s words had physically halted her, as if she couldn’t fathom that *she’d* been included in that list of people. With a blink and a shake of her head, Pansy came to her senses.

“I’ll be over early to do your makeup.”

Hermione tried not to smile. Draco could see the effort she put into pressing her lips together, rolling them between her teeth, smothering her amusement.

Finally she said, “You’ll have to fight Ginny for the honor. I’m sure she’ll be wanting to do it.”

Pansy straightened immediately, as if an actual challenge had been issued, and not something *mostly* in the territory of a teasing joke.

“That’s fine,” Pansy said without a shred of concern. She uncrossed her arms and stepped forward, expression broadcasting a preemptive distaste for whatever she planned to say. “I think we’re having a hug now, too, Granger.”

—

Theo roped them into staying to finish the drinks Blaise had already delivered. And even if Theo hadn’t insisted, all wide smiles and proud thumps on Draco’s back, Pansy’s pouting about fabric swatches and

periodic hugging would have convinced them.

When Pansy began muttering her distaste over *conjuring* flowers instead of cutting them fresh, Hermione's graciousness tipped over the edge, a peculiar teetering between exasperated amusement and genuine annoyance. They bid their friends farewell and Floo'd back to their flat, only to turn right back around and Floo to Grimmauld Place.

Hermione popped her head through first. She called to the Weaslette, who ushered them through, confusion pulling her ginger brows together.

"I thought you had plans tonight?" Ginny said, hand pressed to her barely rounding stomach. "I can set a couple more places at the table, I—"

"Oh, no, no, Gin. Don't worry about us. I'm sorry we've just dropped by. We wanted to tell you something, actually. Are Harry, Ron, and Lavender here?"

Draco trailed behind Hermione obediently, fingers hovering at the base of her spine as they followed the Weaslette through the dark and narrow corridors that lead to the dining room. He braced himself, preparing, yet again, for a face-to-face encounter with Harry Potter and Ronald Weasley. He longed for simpler times when hating them had been easy, as inextricable from the fabric of his person as his family name.

As it turned out, not all inextricable things were truly inextricable. Most days, he didn't mind Potter at all, not that he would admit to such a thing, even to Hermione. A man had to have his pride. And if Weasley kept his mouth shut, Draco could easily pretend he didn't even exist.

"Hi everyone," Hermione said as they entered the dining room.

Potter stood from his chair. "Mione, I thought you couldn't make it." He pulled her into a hug as Draco resisted the urge to cringe at the gods-awful abbreviation of her name that Potter and Weasley liked to slip into.

"We can't," Hermione said, a repeat of her conversation with Ginny. A strange loop. Perhaps Weasley would announce that he, too, had been under the impression that Hermione and Draco were otherwise occupied this evening. And they were; they'd declined their invitation

to this dinner the week before, expecting to be at Theo's. The sudden and thrilling decision to wed had shifted things a bit.

Hermione reached into her bag and procured another cardstock invitation.

"Sunday," she said, handing the card to Potter. "I know it's short notice; I hope you can make it, of course." Her words went quiet, almost bashful. Was she embarrassed to spring this on them so suddenly?

Draco refused to let the subsequent, self-doubting question in the back of his mind of whether or not she was embarrassed of him, too, carry any weight.

"We're getting married, Potter," Draco clarified, as Hermione hadn't actually said the words and the invitation still sat in his hand, unread.

Potter's eyes widened, snapping to Hermione, before dropping to the cardstock.

Ginny sprang into action, a half-shouted *what?* escaping her as she yanked Hermione into a forceful hug. Weasley stood from his chair, peering at the invitation over Potter's shoulder.

Ginny started crying. Hermione did, too.

And for a moment, Draco was reminded so strongly of sitting at Grimmauld Place and feeling like a voyeur, watching these people's joy over announcing a pregnancy. But now, he was a part of the announcement, a wedding this time. It was his joy, his circumstances, that these infuriatingly close friends cried over.

Draco glanced at Lavender, still sitting at the table, but smiling at the scene. She'd been an outsider then, too.

"Hey Brown," Draco started. "Do you know anything about conjuring out of season flowers? We might need some."

Her smile brightened. Evidently, she did.

"I can bake a cake," Ginny offered, pulling back from her vice-like embrace on Hermione. "I have all sorts of recipes from mum. But—wait, *this* Sunday? As in, two days from now, Sunday?"

Hermione nodded, wiped a path of tears from her cheeks, and then

smacked Ginny on the bicep the moment her eyes darted southward.

“I’m *not* pregnant. Don’t you dare ask me.” Hermione retaliated with her own pointed look at Ginny’s stomach.

The Weaslette laughed while Potter made a kind of choking noise. Hermione stepped back, creating space out of the glob of hugs and tears and general sentimentality Draco found decidedly distasteful in these quantities.

She stopped when her heel tapped the toe of his loafer. She leaned into him, her back to his front, slightly staggered in their stance. Draco let his left hand rest casually, not-so-inconspicuously, at her hip.

“We—I—we don’t really see the point in waiting, anymore. Draco’s disinheritance has been finalized; it feels like the right time,” Hermione said, head leaning back, glancing up at him.

He supposed there were worse places to be than standing in Harry Potter’s dining room with some of his reluctant acquaintances. Having her with him, saying such things, soothed the irritation that red hair, freckles, and lightning-shaped scars generally caused him.

Potter blinked, pushed up his glasses—Draco vowed then and there to never *ever* do such a thing with his own—and released a breath. “Oh, well. Okay,” Harry said. Apparently all he needed was Hermione’s word. “We’ll be there.”

“Course we’ll be there, ‘Mione,” Weasley added. The kindness in his confidence suffered under his use of that blasted nickname.

It had an effect on Hermione, though. The pressure leaning against him increased, as if she’d sagged under the weight of knowing they would attend. As if there had ever been any doubt.

“Well we—we just wanted to come tell you—invite you—in person, but we should go, let you get back to your meal.”

“You can stay if you want,” Ginny offered.

Hermione shook her head. “Thank you, but we have plans. Oh—before we go, though. Pansy wants to do my makeup. Might even try running the whole thing on Sunday. You should probably come early if you want to beat her to it.”

A serious, deadly competitive look crossed the Weaslette's face. She frowned, eyes narrowed.

"I'll be there."

Potter groaned; Hermione laughed; and Weasley bit into a roll he'd nicked from the tabletop.

—

Hermione hadn't been lying when she told Ginny they had plans for their evening. Draco had many plans involving her. They'd negotiated heavily over how they'd spend that Friday night: cutting their night with his friends short, adding in a visit to hers.

Negotiations had been intense, with tough bargaining on both sides. In the end, they came to the conclusion that they would take that Friday night for themselves.

For reading together on their sofa, sharing the warmth of a single, atrocious afghan blanket. For enjoying their fireplace, used for a crackling fire and not the Floo. For their Christmas tree, decorated mostly with magic, but including a few small ornaments gifted to Hermione by her parents: twenty one of them, one given to her each Christmas, with a few notable years missing that she put on an excellent show of pretending not to mind so much.

For lazy kissing and wandering, meandering hands. A warm winter night spent inside, together. A few blinks from a wedding, from forever, from their future. Hazy evenings like this, backdropped by fairy lights and the smell of spiced cider and mulled wine, had an unreal quality to them. It was a delicious kind of sinking, slipping beneath the surface of something that posed no threat, but that enveloped and held close instead.

He kissed her in an unhurried way, tasting cinnamon and cloves on her tongue, feeling the languid, lazy way she let him hold her when she'd had a bit to drink.

He memorized the lines of her body by touch, such that if he ever lost his sight, he'd know her skin by feel alone.

He watched the shape of her mouth when she whimpered under his touch, such that if he ever lost his hearing, he'd know the way those sounds looked when wrenched from her throat.

He catalogued every breathy sigh, every swallow, every whispered word of affirmation. He tasted every inch of skin he could find, exposing more as his trailing hands pushed her blouse up and out of the way. He drowned in vanilla, in cinnamon, in allspice, in bourbon, in clove. In warm, winter scents, anchored in the things that made her so uniquely *her*.

He'd had but two glasses of wine that evening and had never felt more intoxicated in his entire life, nor so deliriously happy. He thought it might find a limit, putter out, that contented delirium, but it didn't.

Not as he led her to their bedroom. Not as he pulled back burgundy sheets and dropped the last of his clothes to the floor. Not as he kissed her again—for the millionth time, at least—still so unhurried. He had nowhere to be except with her.

Not as he pushed into her, swallowing her gusting breath with another kiss. Not as she clung to him, fingertips digging into the flesh beneath his shoulder-blades. Not as he tasted salt on her skin, nor as she chanted, breathless and whining, into his ear broken utterances of *please, yes, gods, Draco* over and over and over again: a bespoke incantation that set him on fire.

Not as her spine arched, neck exposed, head thrown back against the pillows, short nails scraping his back. Not as she gasped, panted, stopped thinking, just for that moment, and trusted him to carry her through it.

And not as he came, face buried in her curls, brain ignited, soul settled.

—

Friday passed. Saturday happened. What did one do the day before one's last-minute wedding?

Draco began by brewing, taking his tea in their guest room, hair still disheveled from the night before. Hermione joined him a few minutes

later, anxiety crawling across her face as she settled onto a stool nearby, watching him work.

“There’s nothing to plan,” he said. “It’s an unplanned wedding for a reason. And whatever you think you might plan, Pansy’s going to have something infinitely more complex already figured out. I doubt she’s slept since we told her.” Draco watched as Hermione frowned, rolled her eyes, then reached for her tea, sipping with what looked suspiciously like resignation.

“You’re very nonchalant for a man raised in an environment obsessed with grand, over-the-top weddings.”

Draco’s smile came easily as he stirred his cauldron.

“Want to know a secret?” Her brows lifted. “They’re deadly boring. Astoria’s was the most pleasant society wedding I’ve attended—probably ever. You’re the only thing I need at my wedding; I could take or leave the rest. Therefore, we will not be spending our Saturday fretting. It is *my* day, after all.”

Hermione dipped her finger in her tea and flicked it at him, hitting him with a few tepid drops.

“Careful now. Let’s not contaminate my potions, please.”

She laughed. “Saturdays aren’t your day anymore, you know.”

“Do I?”

“Of course you do. They’re all yours now.”

He stopped stirring. Too long. Potion ruined.

Worth it, though, to hear her say such an outstanding thing.

“Is that so?” He set his stirring rod aside, leaned against the bench, folded his arms across his chest.

“If you goad me, I’ll stop saying nice things.”

He crossed to her, coming to a halt just in front of her stool. Perhaps instinctively, her knees widened, letting him step between them. He planted his arms on the hard countertop behind her, bracketing her.

“Please never stop saying such nice things,” he said with every drop of sincerity in his bones.

She smiled as she set her tea aside, looping one of her hands on his forearm, leaning her head against it.

“Am I supposed to be nervous?” she asked, eyes closed.

“I don’t know. Am I?”

“I’m not.”

“Neither am I.”

She opened her eyes, lifted her head, and grinned at him. “Maybe I’d feel nervous if it didn’t feel like we’ve earned this but we’ve—gods, we’ve earned it, don’t you think?”

He lifted a hand from the workbench, fingers winding through her hair instead. “It’s taken enough work, that’s for certain.” He dipped, bent to kiss her, and paused, eyes caught on an unfamiliar crate sitting on the bench behind her. “What’s that?”

Hermione tilted her head, following his gaze. She huffed dramatically, a level of exasperation that told Draco the answer before she’d even said it.

“I thought working at Theo’s would be *easier* than Malfoy Manor.”

Draco nearly, almost, but most certainly did not, snort.

Hermione’s head shook from side to side, curls bouncing. “It’s as if he *wants* to get himself sent to Azkaban.”

“Is that right?” A deadpan voice. Draco knew very well what kinds of illegal things Theo liked to play with.

“That box”—she tilted her head towards it in reference—“has *six* of his illegal portkeys in it. I can’t just leave them at the Estate. If anyone else were to search the manor with our diagnostic runes they’d turn up immediately but—well, their magical history is post-war. Theo would get into so much trouble—”

Draco kissed her, hand at the back of her head holding her steady as he poured every ounce of his exploding affection into stealing her words—her very breath—with a kiss. She made a surprised noise, probably startled by the rough intensity that took him unaware, too. But how could he not kiss her this way?

She relaxed against him, melting for him, nipping at his lips and

dragging her nails through his hair in that fucking *divine* way she did. She slowed. Pulled them apart. Kissed his jaw.

“What was—wow, what was that for?”

“You. Bending the rules for Theo.”

“Well—I don’t *want* him to get arrested. And *I* know his portkeys are harmless—revolutionary, actually. But—the Ministry wouldn’t.”

“You offered to break those rules for me once; do you remember? Over a bottle of wine.”

“Well, you looked terribly surprised that I needed to take it. It was a bit of an in-between time and I really, really wanted to be able to kiss you again, you see.”

“You’re breaking the rules for Theo now, too.”

“I don’t need you to rub my flexible morality in my face. I realize I have a tendency to twist things to my preferences. I am not unaware of this character flaw. I just—well, I don’t really care.”

“But you care enough to protect Theo.”

“Of course I do. He’s my friend. He’s *marrying* us tomorrow, for Merlin’s sake.”

Draco couldn’t help the grin that overtook him. So wide. So happy.

“And that’s what the kiss was for,” he said.

Hermione pursed her lips, descending into a thoughtful, almost wicked expression. It sent Draco’s blood pumping, simmering, *anticipating*.

“So, if I do nice things for your friends you’ll kiss me like that?”

Draco smirked, leaned closer, caging her in, desperate to keep her right where he wanted her as she followed that deliciously sly train of thought.

“Absolutely,” he breathed, fingers in her curls again.

“You know, I was thinking of sending Pansy a gift basket for being such a *good friend* and trying to help me plan a wedding.”

He wound his other arm around her waist, bringing her to the edge of her stool, hips pressed to his. “Am I being extorted for affections?”

“Absolutely,” she said, a perfect repetition of his earlier response.

He supposed she’d earned it.

He kissed her. Her lips. Her jaw. Her neck.

He kissed just behind her ear, suckling.

He kissed the column of her throat, laving.

He kissed her clavicle. Her shoulder.

He unbuttoned her blouse and kissed the swell of her breasts.

And when he had her thoroughly breathless, he lifted her from her seat and kissed her more, lost in an oxygen-deprived haze as her fingers pulled his shirttails from his trousers.

Unbuttoned. Unfastened. Unzipped.

Leading to the bedroom.

Undone.

—

“Blaise already tried to give me a shot. I really don’t need one,” Draco said, pushing away the glass in Theo’s hand as they stood together in the Grangers’ garden. Theo simply arched a brow. The waiting was rather anxiety-inducing, if he admitted it to himself. For this not being a big to-do, Hermione had certainly been inside *getting ready*, whatever that entailed, for a very, very long time.

Draco’s gaze wandered to Mr. and Mrs. Granger as they chatted with Potter. Draco blinked. For a moment, he had genuinely forgotten that Potter grew up with muggles, that he’d known the Grangers much longer than Draco had. Of all people, Potter probably had the most comfort to offer a pair of muggles who had kindly, graciously, opened their home to a small gathering of magical folk for the afternoon.

It wasn't as if they could ignore the magic today. From the spells charming the outdoor garden a tolerable temperature to the conjured flowers, tables, and chairs, magic surrounded them.

Draco fidgeted with his ring, not used to wearing one. Not on that hand, not on that finger. They'd purchased him a simple gold band the day after they decided they would simply *get married* without a real wedding. Hermione already had a ring, obviously. But Draco needed one, too, for the ceremony, for the bonding magic. Choosing one with her right there, simple and easy and so full of hope, had been a most surreal experience.

Pansy walked up to where Draco stood waiting with Theo and Blaise, murder lingering behind her eyes as she crossed her arms and huffed.

"I've been kicked out." Not exactly a greeting.

"I'm impressed you made it this long, honestly," Draco said.

"I have too many opinions, apparently. Are you aware she's not even wearing a *gown*? Just a *dress*. I wanted to make it floor length. Add some lace, or appliqué, or *anything*. She wouldn't let me. The ginger threatened me with a bat-bogey. Draco, your wedding is an absolute failure, I hope you know."

"Thank you, Pans. But as we've elected to marry in her parents' back garden, I had zero hope of meeting your expectations in the first place. Afterwards, the food's going to be takeaway, too."

Pansy's mouth dropped open; she made a strangled, disgusted noise. She blinked several times as if waiting for something.

"You're *serious*?"

Draco smiled. Perhaps this was part of why Pansy and Hermione had forged an inexplicable almost-friendship; they were similarly fun to rile up. Although, with Hermione he tended to prefer for that riling to end with her naked, writhing beneath him.

"You might not have noticed, Pans. But I'm also wearing the same robes I wore to Astoria's wedding."

She snapped her mouth shut, grimaced, and then: "No, you aren't. Draco, you—are you really?"

"Yes, I am. We're keeping this very simple. And Hermione said she

was going to pick her favorite dress and charm it white for the day. That's all we need."

"It's not even an actual wedding dress—albeit an offensive one? Good gods, Draco."

"No, it's not. I think she picked one that's normally purple."

Pansy looked a little like she might be sick, if nothing else, from the force of indignation she kept swallowing back. She gaped like she wanted to say something else, but Draco imagined she now feared learning any new information about how they'd decided to have a wedding straight out of her nightmares. Instead of demanding more answers she likely didn't want to know, she simply took one of the many conjured chairs in the garden and sat with a glass of wine and a frown.

"You sure you don't need this?" Theo asked, holding the shot glass out to him again.

"No, Theo, I'm quite alright."

"Right. That's good. I might, though. Lots of pressure, you see, being responsible for your bonding magic."

Draco angled himself more towards Theo, trying to wrangle the lift of his brows so as not to project *too* much of the concern that just took flight beneath his skin, pushing against the surface.

"You *can* do it, can't you? I didn't think too much about it because you're, you know"—a vague gesture—"you. And you can do—anything. But you *can* perform our marriage magic, right?"

"Yes, yes, yes, of course. I just"—he knocked back the shot and vanished the glass—"that's the only one I'm having, I swear. Just to help with the nerves a bit."

"You don't have to be nervous. I'm not nervous," Draco said, trying to offer support in what felt like a strange reversal of what ought to be happening in that moment.

The back door to the house opened and Ginny stepped out. She made a beeline for Mr. and Mrs. Granger, whispered something to Mr. Granger, then met Draco's eye. She winked, gave him a thumbs up, and suddenly, people were moving. Arranging themselves into chairs set up on one side of the garden as Mr. Granger slipped away, inside

the house.

For as much as Pansy complained, and for being thrown together at the last minute and with zero expectations, the garden almost looked like a real wedding. Lavender actually knew a few things about floral spells, charming the garden to bloom beautifully out of season. And the climate spell holding back the chill had formed a beautiful protective bubble, catching the cautious beginnings of a snow flurry overhead. The sky was grey, which he imagined most people might have found foreboding on their wedding day. But when Draco commented on it shortly after arriving at the Grangers', Hermione just shrugged, looked him straight in the eye, and said, "I like grey."

And that was that.

It was everything he needed in a wedding, really. Especially after having been threatened with so many wine lists and seating charts and fabric swatches in the past.

He felt comfortable. He smelled roses blooming nearby, gardenias, too. And somewhere else in the garden, a hint of rosemary with the herbs. He had a good history in gardens with Hermione.

Blaise took his seat, leaving Draco alone with Theo, standing in wait.

His skin prickled: tight, tingling with anticipation. Not with nerves or fear, but with genuine excitement thrumming across his skin, skittering through sinew, pumping through veins.

Mr. Granger opened the garden door again, and Hermione stepped through.

They didn't have music, this wasn't meant to be a *real* ceremony after all, but Draco heard familiar notes ringing in his ears all the same, almost deafening. In a blink, she reached him, her father finding his seat amongst the others.

She carried no bouquet, but she had flowers tucked into the braid that framed her face, that ended in a loose, wild bun at the nape of her neck. A few errant curls spiraled out of the braid, out of the bun, and Draco wondered if Pansy or Ginny had tried to tame them, if they'd realized how perfect she looked with them escaping.

His eyes caught on the flower tucked behind her ear, heart slamming to a near-stop behind his ribs. A knot formed in the back of his throat, tight, as he struggled to swallow over it.

A white daffodil. Latin name: the *narcissus*.

His mother's namesake flower.

His heart rate slowed again, recovering from the surprise; he swallowed past the lump. An empty space inside his chest filled. He couldn't decipher his own emotions, couldn't discern if seeing the flower made him happy or sad. But he needn't figure that out, not now.

Hermione reached for his hands, squeezing them in hers.

"It felt appropriate," she said in a whisper. Because of course she knew what he'd noticed, watched him react to it. Even after the hatred she'd endured, the things Draco had given up, Hermione Granger still chose to wear his mother's namesake flower on their wedding day. She gave him permission to miss and love and mourn not having her present, even if it was only the idea of her he missed. After all of it, his mother wouldn't be entirely absent, after all.

He simply could not possibly love this beautiful, forgiving woman any more.

Could their audience see it? How he'd unravelled already? It felt so obvious, so apparent. For how calm and collected he'd been just minutes before, chatting with Theo, now he'd started to unspool, unwind. He could barely think, hardly breathed, heard almost nothing as Theo began his incantations. He could see nothing but the warm, rich brown in Hermione's eyes, earth tones rooting him in reality.

Theo continued casting, and Draco realized that the entire bonding ceremony had started without him even realizing it, lost as he was in a disorienting sense of *something* indeterminable.

Draco inhaled, warmth flooding him, lungs oxygenating blood, pumped from his heart to his fingertips, where he held Hermione's hands.

Theo instructed them to let their right hands drop, holding left hand to left hand, a sort of handshake grip. Of all the ways he'd touched Hermione, held her, ran his hands over her, this grip felt the most foreign, much less intimate than such an event seemed like it would require. But when Theo began the incantations again, their rings began to glow. Golden filaments, glinting with magic, sprang from each of their rings, winding around joined hands.

Draco stared at the golden magic until his eyes couldn't bear the strain any longer, filaments glowing so brightly it stained the back of his eyelids orange with each blink. He looked up at Hermione instead, finding that she had several tears tracking silently down her face. Draco reached to wipe them, only to have his right hand smacked away by Theo, still mid-incantation.

A bubble of laughter escaped Hermione's throat. Even Draco smiled, not quite so overwhelmed anymore. The golden light from the bonding spell illuminated Hermione's face, just like candlelight at a dinner table, like the first time he really noticed just how lovely she was, how he saw constellations in her face, saw a future with her in it.

The glow faded, magic settling into skin as Theo cleared his throat. A beat passed, heavy and anticipatory, as Draco waited, not knowing what came next.

"If you have any affirmations or declarations you'd like to exchange, please do."

Hermione smiled, left hands still held together, and took a small step forward, right hand finding Draco's jaw. She still had tears on her face: quiet, happy things. He wound his right arm around her waist. From this distance, he knew her words were for him, and him alone.

"I'm so proud of you, Draco Malfoy. Proud of this extraordinary man you've become. Proud I get to call you mine. That I get to spend the rest of my life growing with you, loving you." Her hand shifted from his jaw to the back of his neck, a familiar anchor for them both. "Thank you for choosing me."

He dropped his head to hers, eyes stinging, vision swimming, utterly lost. "Gods, I love you. More than my name. More than my money. More than all of it. If I had millions of choices, millions of chances, I'd pick you every time. I count myself wildly lucky that you've picked me even once."

He kissed her. It felt like neither the first time, nor the last time, but all the glorious in-betweens they would have with each other.

Theo cleared his throat. "Alright kids, let's break it up. I've heard there's cake. You're married now, let's celebrate."

Hermione laughed against his lips, and Draco did the same, sharing that joy. Another beat passed before they finally came apart.

Theo clapped Draco on the back. “Congratulations. Looks like you’ve gotten a happy ending, after all.”

Hermione’s smile grew, leaning back from their kiss. “I think it’s more of a beginning,” she said.

A beginning.

Draco had so much time ahead of him. Time with her. To live a life he could be proud of. He meant what he’d said. If he had a million lives, a million choices, a million chances. He’d pick her every time. And they had so much of that. Years and years and years.

Years. Broken into months into weeks into days—into hours, minutes, seconds—into moments. Simple at one end, complex at the other. In Draco’s experience, moments, even when simple, had a habit of becoming irretrievable. Moments grew, stretched, multiplied into ages and eras that defined whole stretches of measurable time. Draco regretted several moments in his life, some within his control, some without: all of them irretrievable in nature. At a certain point, wedged between ‘what-ifs’ of his own devising, he’d stopped trying to keep track of those regrettable moments: now and then, pushing and pulling, coming and going, beginning and end. Moments were only moments for just as long. After that, he had no control.

Instead, he let himself live.

Chapter End Notes

art available for this story (roughly in chronological order):

[Draco and Hermione in the parlor by chestercompany](#)

[Healing on the sofa by bookloverdream](#)

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I owe so many thanks to [icepower55](#), [Endless_musings](#), and [persephone_stone](#) for their tireless support and friendship in writing this story. It takes a special kind of someone to barely blink at 60k+ document drops and the time turner nonsense I put them through. They are outstanding, brilliant souls with fantastic writing of their own that you should be checking out!!

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I thank you all again: for your generosity in supporting this story, your enthusiasm in reading it, and your kindness when interacting with me. I adore each and every one of you! Thank you, thank you, thank you!

End Notes

comments and kudos are lovely, should you feel so inclined, they may or may not be my primary food group.

I owe huge thanks to [icepower55](#), [Endless_musings](#), and [persephone_stone](#) for their amazing support as betas and friends!

places to find me on the internet [linktree links](#)!

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